

Halo: Echoes of Eternity

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Summary: The Covenant have created a new technology that could spell doom for the Human race, but the Master Chief has been mobilized to capture it. There's just one problem: this technology can fight for itself.

1. Chapter 1: Mission Brief

****Author's Notes: ****First of all, I do not own Halo or any of the characters therein; it is the property of Bungie and all the other companies that made it. Secondly, this fanfic takes place in between the Halo Book First Strike and the events of Halo 2. If you have not read the books, be advised, there are spoilers in this work. Also, some of the dates and place names (particularly planets and systems) may be a bit off. I had to get most of my information on them from the books, and I had to send those back home as I'm in the Navy and don't have a lot of room for stuff like books, so it's a good thing that I think I have a decent memory. I haven't played Halo 2 at all, as I don't own an X-Box (please oh, please put it out for PC), so if some of the plotlines in this work don't coincide with those of the game, you can't hurt me, because I'm in the Navy, and the Master Chief will back me up.

"We are never alone.

We are never without guidance.

Even in the silence of our dreams,

Who we are, and who we will be,

Is forever remembered

In the Echoes of Eternity."

- Covenant prayer, found inscribed upon a piece of debris discovered in orbit above the ghost planet Eridanus.

0400, October 2, 2552 (revised date, Military Calendar) **Aboard UNSC Military Command Station 001, in orbit above Mars, Sol System:**

"Sorry to wake you so early, Master Chief," the young Third Class said apologetically as she struggled to keep up with the Spartan. "About ten minutes ago, we received notification that Admiral Marks would be conducting a Priority Level One holographic briefing with General Tannery here on the station. We were given orders to have you present."

Master Chief Spartan 117 â€" known only to a few as John â€" strode quickly down the hall, making last minute checks on his suit of MJOLNIR armor. It had just been repaired after the disaster on Halo and his subsequent return to the Sol system, and he had yet to test its operational readiness.

"I wasn't asleep," he replied quietly, his voice filtered through his helmet.

The noncom looked a bit surprised, not to mention like she had only woken up ten minutes ago herself. "Oh. Wellâ€¦ I'm glad," she offered lamely. "If Admiral Marks has initiated a Priority Level One transmission, whatever he has to say can't be good. I think we're all going to need to be wide awake sooner than we might like." She turned down a side corridor, following red markers on the walls that read "Communications."

"General Tannery is waiting for you in the tertiary conference chambers," she continued as she stopped at a console station and started accessing the system. "If you'll please proceed there, I'll let the General know you're coming."

The Master Chief nodded, and continued down the corridor. It was probable, he surmised, that the woman's assumption was correct. The tertiary conference chamber, rarely used, was equipped with exceptionally good security systems. If General Tannery wanted to take the Admiral's call there, it likely was not good news at all.

And when a Spartan was summoned, it was a sure sign that something big was about to go down.

He could only hope that the Admiral wasn't contacting them to announce the beginning of the Covenant's invasion on Earth. It had only been two weeks since he and a small team of his fellow Spartans had destroyed the _Unyielding Hierophant_, the Covenant command and control base for the invasion fleet. Most of the invasion fleet had gone with it, and ONI had estimated it would take the aliens years to rebuild. But the Covenant had surprised them before, so the Master Chief could not quite shake his sense of foreboding as he approached the tertiary conference chamber.

The security system outside the chamber's door interfaced with his armor's internal computers for a millisecond, and once it verified the authenticity of the self-identification program, the meter-thick titanium door swung silently backward on hinges as big around as his forearm. The room within was deceptively well furnished, complete with a long glass table running down the center with carved wooden

legs, comfortably cushioned chairs lining both sides, and a handful of couches along the gray metal walls. There were even a few tapestries hung at evenly spaced intervals along them, depicting scenes of various military victories from Earth's early space colonization era. The chamber looked like the type one could find in the headquarters of any large business, but this one disguised ONI's best security and anti-surveillance equipment. The Master Chief sincerely doubted that even Elite Covenant spies, had they been present, would have been able to find out what was going on inside.

As the door closed behind him, General Marcus Tannery spun his chair around to face him. "Ah, there you are, Master Chief," he said quietly. The General was a middle-aged man, with graying hair cut in the short military style, but he was well-built, and his eyes gave testament to the fact that he still had a great amount of energy left. He was known for personally leading his troops on the battlefield, when he could, and John had a great deal of respect for him.

The Spartan came to attention and saluted. "General. Reporting as ordered."

Tannery gestured for him to be at ease. "Make yourself comfortable. I'm expecting the Admiral's transmission at any moment." He turned his chair back to face the screen mounted on the wall at the far end of the table.

John stepped up next to him, but did not sit down. Instead, he clasped his hands at the small of his back and stood at parade rest.

He briefly considered asking Tannery if he knew what this meeting was about, but decided against it. If the General wanted him to know, he would say something. And there was always a possibility that the General himself didn't know what to expect.

A minute passed, then two, and the room remained deathly silent. Suddenly, the screen flashed and came to life, filled with a close-up view of the face of the noncom John had left outside the conference room. "Incoming transmission," she said into the microphone headset she wore. "Please standby."

The screen switched to the UNSC crest, then flickered again before being replaced by the image of Admiral Marks. Like most Admirals, Marks was an older man. He had lost much of his white hair, but like Tannery, his gray eyes still shone with vigor. John was familiar with Marks, but this would be his first chance to interact with him directly, so he made a mental note to himself to pay close attention.

"General, Master Chief," the Admiral greeted, his already rough voice slightly distorted by the comm unit's speakers. "Glad you could join me."

"Admiral," Tannery nodded in greeting.

John snapped to attention briefly. "Good morning, Admiral."

The room that Marks was in appeared to be an office, complete with a

well-furnished desk and paintings on the wall behind him. But there were no windows, and John realized that the walls were solid titanium, lightly painted over and textured to give the impression of stone. Wherever the Admiral was, it was a secure location, easily as protected "if not more so" as the location Tannery and John were in now.

Marks leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. His expression wasn't grim, but John noted that it looked intense. "Gentlemen, I'm sure I don't need to remind you that everything discussed here stays here," he said quietly. He waited until both the Master Chief and the General nodded. "What I'm about to tell you is to stay secret at all costs, until I personally direct you to release it to those who need to know."

"Understood, Admiral," Tannery said.

"Good." Marks surprised John by smiling. "Now that the formalities are out of the way, I believe that we can finally say that we just might have come across a lucky break in our war with the Covenant. Not to slight your efforts in the operation to destroy the Unyielding Hierophant, Master Chief, but that could pale compared to this."

John's curiosity finally got the better of him. "How so, sir?" he prompted.

Marks started to explain. "As you know, the Covenant gain most of their technology through adaptive means. In other words, they don't invent their own technology; they find something they like from another species, and adjust it to suit their own needs. Most of what they have comes from a race they call the Forerunners, those who built Halo. But since they went to war against us, they've found some odds and ends in our technology that appealed to their fancy as well."

"Namely, our shipboard AIs," John finished for him.

"Precisely. Now, they've never captured an intact AI, but you know as well as I do that even the most thorough erasure programs can't get everything. The Covenant have managed to put together bits and pieces of code over the years, and now they're coming up with their own AIs." Marks' gaze focused on John. "Master Chief, Cortana ran into one of those AIs when she hacked into the Ascendant Justice's system, before the ship was destroyed. Fortunately for her, it was incomplete and highly unstable."

"And the bad news?" Tannery interrupted.

Marks sighed. "The bad news is, ONI is now telling us that the Covenant have perfected their AI system. We believe that the Covenant AIs now have the potential to be as effective and deadly as ones like Cortana. We also know they've installed a fully functional prototype on one of their heavy cruisers."

"And how is this a lucky break for us?" Tannery interjected once again.

Marks grinned. "The ship crashed." Stunned silence followed the statement. He hurried to explain. "Obviously, the Covenant wanted to

keep their little pet project a secret," he said. "According to what we've been able to piece together, the ship arrived from Covenant space about a week ago, but she came straight out of their docks. They hadn't finished running tests on her, so they needed to send her someplace quiet where they could keep her existence under wraps until they were ready to set her loose on our forces. They chose this system."

He tapped a sequence into the screen on his desk, and a large chart of a star system coalesced above the table in front of John and Tannery. It spun slowly, the motes of light that comprised it dancing and flickering as the image came into focus.

John recognized it immediately. "That's the Eridanus system," he said.

"That's correct," the Admiral confirmed. "The reasons for which they chose it are obvious. The planet was glassed years ago, and the rest of the system is now uninhabited. It's so far outside of space that we can reliably control that we don't even bother to send scouts out there anymore."

"As near as we can tell, the ship was in orbit above Eridanus II for about two days when it ran into an ion storm. They must have been caught with their shields down, because the ship ended up on the ground after sustaining heavy damage."

"How do we know all this?" Tannery asked. His voice was skeptical, but he was leaning forward in his seat, a sure sign that he was interested.

"Well, that's where the 'lucky' meets the 'break,'" Marks responded. "When the Covenant wiped out the Eridanus system, they missed a galactic survey probe. A whole network of them were set up in deep space across our sector of the galaxy, back when the Science Council of the UNSC was in its heyday. They're mostly obsolete, and they consume far more energy than is practical, so they were reprogrammed to report in only when they detected an anomaly."

"That's why the Covenant didn't kill this one," John put in. "It wasn't active when they hit the system. They couldn't see it."

"Either that, or they didn't think it was worth the energy it would take to destroy it," Tannery added.

Admiral Marks shrugged. "At this point, I'm not really concerned which is the case. Long story short, this obsolete survey probe detected the cruiser's subspace disturbance as it entered the system. Its onboard sensors hadn't been updated with Covenant engine specs, but when it logged the ship's arrival as an anomaly and sent a report to the Science Council headquarters, they knew what they were seeing and promptly notified us."

"Naturally, we wanted to find out what the Covenant was up to in the system. Like us, they had no reason to be there. So we sent a Longsword equipped with long range scanners to see what we could find. We found this."

Another image sprang up in place of the star system. It took John a

moment to realize he was looking at a portion of Eridanus II's obsidian landscape. Right in the middle of the image was the wreckage of a huge starship, its iridescent purple hull plainly Covenant in design. The distinct hammerhead shape of its bow had been warped and distorted from the heat and force of its crash, but it was still recognizable.

"Gentlemen," the Admiral said into the silence of the conference chamber, "I give you the _Echoes of Eternity_. Or at least, what's left of her. I don't think even the Covenant could make her fly again."

"Forgive me for playing the devil's advocate today," General Tannery spoke up, "but she looks like any other Covenant heavy cruiser. How do we know that the _Eternity_ is equipped with an AI?"

Marks smiled patiently. "Because the AI attacked the Longsword fighter we sent in." He gestured toward the image hovering above their table. "This was the only image the pilot was able to get of the _Eternity_ herself. He tried to get closer, but as soon as he came into real-time transmission range, the AI invited itself aboard and started messing with his systems. We can surmise that their vessel has lost its subspace communications ability, because it tried to access his comm system first. He realized what it was doing and locked the systems down, just after he sent us this info. It got mad, and blew the heck out of his fighter."

"And the pilot?" John prompted.

Marks shook his head sadly. "Didn't stand a chance. The AI overrode all the safety interlocks and initiated an instantaneous engine core overload. He wouldn't even have had time to reach for his ejection console. And not even that would have gotten him clear in time."

"So where do we stand with this?" Tannery asked. He was still leaning forward in his seat, fingers steepled beneath his chin, his eyes glittering as they lingered on the hologram of the _Eternity_. The image looked deceptively still and peaceful, a mask for the danger that lay within.

"Put simply," Marks replied, "we've got a state-of-the-art Covenant heavy cruiser on the ground, largely intact, but disabled, in territory that we know well." He gave a grin that looked vaguely predatory. "And we're the only ones who know where it's at."

"What do you want us to do, Sir?" John asked.

"I want you to carry on a centuries-old Navy tradition, Master Chief. Take her as prize."

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2. Chapter 2: Mission Prep

****Author's Notes: ****It's a short chapter; that's how things fell out. The next one is written, I just need to get it typed up. That's what happens when you write most of the story by hand while in Navy Gun School classes. Yes, I do pay attention â€" I can't help it if my brain can multitask and likes to use its full potential. **0445,

October 2, 2552 (revised date, Military Calendar):**

When John arrived back at his quarters, he was not surprised to find Linda waiting for him. There was no way she could know where he was going or exactly what he was up to, but she was already suited up in her own MJOLNIR armor and had her sniper rifle slung over one shoulder.

"Ready for action, Master Chief," she said simply.

John didn't answer, but stepped inside his room as the door slid open. His quarters were sparse as far as accommodations went; there was one low cot, a table with two simple chairs, and a single holographic image mounted on the wall that portrayed the entire SPARTAN team â€" just months before most of them had been killed on Reach.

John reached under the cot and pulled out a long armored case. He opened it up, revealing a battle rifle and several magazines of ammunition. He checked the gun to make sure it was in working order, tested its electronics, then started to inventory the ammo.

"You don't want me to come, do you?" Linda said into his continued silence. Her helmet filtered out most of the emotion in her voice, but he could still sense her frustration.

He slipped a magazine into the rifle and snapped it into place, then set the weapon back into the case and closed it.

"With all due respect, Master Chief," she went on, "this is getting old."

"What is?" he asked her as he pulled out a pair of combat knives and examined their blades.

"You always trying to protect us," she replied. "We're soldiers, Spartans. This is what we were made for. I know you feel responsible for what happened on Reach, but you can't keep shielding us forever. You can't keep fighting alone. You're not the only one that wants retribution."

"All right," he said.

She hesitated, her confusion obvious. "All right, what?"

"You can come."

"Oh. Right. Well. Ready for action, Master Chief," she said again, snapping back to attention.

"Just make sure you bring a carbine," he said as he passed on his way back out into the corridor. "If there's any fighting, a lot of it will be close quarters."

"Copy that," she said as she hurried to catch up with him. "You're serious about me coming along?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Where we're going, I'm going to need all the backup I can get."

0500, October 2, 2552:

John and Linda stood quietly outside the blast door that separated the Office of Naval Intelligence lab from the rest of the laboratory complex aboard the station. There were no warnings on the door, no brightly colored words to keep people away, but the black-armored guards that stood on either side of it were plenty. The added presence of two Spartans was enough to make everyone who passed by hurry quickly on their way.

With a quiet hiss of released pressure, the two halves of the door slid apart halfway, and a woman stepped out. Her white lab coat â€" with "ONI" printed across the left breast in black letters â€" and her fair skin contrasted sharply with her black hair and oddly dark eyes. "She's ready now," she said simply. She turned and re-entered the lab, with John and Linda close behind.

They followed the lab tech through several corridors and rooms, until they finally arrived at a secondary lab behind another set of blast doors.

"Well, well, well, Master Chief," came a familiar female voice. "I'm glad to see you haven't gotten yourself into any trouble since we last saw each other." The life-size image of a purple-blue female sprang to life on the holopanel in front of them, and stood regarding the two Spartans with glowing eyes, her hands on her hips in her usual, casual posture.

"Hello, Cortana," John greeted. "Feeling better?"

"Absolutely," the AI replied with a grin. "ONI is finally convinced that I've given them all of my data on Halo and what happened ever since we left Reach. It sure is good to have all that memory space back." She stopped and regarded both John and Linda for a long moment. "Something's up." It wasn't a question.

"Feel like going on a little trip?" John asked.

Cortana's smile returned. "You know it. It's about time, too. These ONI spooks are starting to creep me out." She made a face at the lab tech, and sighed in exasperation when the woman only blinked. She looked back at John. "Come on, get me out of here before they decide to start dissecting my memory core."

"Ready when you are."

"Downloading now." Her image flickered briefly, then disappeared. Moments later, a small data chip ejected itself from the holo terminal.

John pulled the chip from its slot, and slipped it into a matching slot in the back of his helmet. There was a burst of static, and then, the familiar icy presence filled his mind like a rush of cold water. It seemed more intense than usual for some reason, and he was reminded of the odd instability Cortana had suffered after Halo's destruction. Was something still wrong with her, or was it just because he'd become accustomed to being alone in his mind over the past two weeks?

"Hmm," Cortana's voice said from his helmet's internal receivers.

"Well, it's good to see you haven't messed things up too badly since I've been gone." Green lights flashed on his heads-up display as a few of his armor's memory files were rearranged. "There, that's better."

"Good to see you, too," he said wryly.

3. Chapter 3: Mission Commence

****Author's Notes: ****Sorry it's been so long since I updated this story. The last week has been crazy. That's the Navy for you. At least the Master Chief sympathizesâ€¦ Thanks for all the comments. They are much appreciated. Enjoy the next chapter. It's kind of long, but I feel well worth itâ€¦ ****0600, October 2, 2552:****

The secondary launch bay of the orbital base was mostly deserted. A handful of techs were busily working on the gutted hulk of a Longsword fighter off to one side, while closer to the rear of the bay, an automated system was meticulously scanning the hull of a carbon-scored Pelican dropship. None of them paid any attention to the three people that entered the bay quietly and started toward one of the other craft sitting on the titanium deck.

"I'm sorry we couldn't do any better," General Tannery said, indicating another Longsword fighter, its hull streaked with carbon from several near hits. "She's a bit banged up, but she's still solid, and my chief engineer assures me her engines are well above specs. She's the fastest we've got, and she's slip-capable."

"What about armaments?" John asked quietly.

Neither he nor Linda were wearing their armor. Their suits were carefully stowed in the gravsled that Linda pushed ahead of her, along with an array of explosives, sidearms, and monitoring and sensing equipment. Without their armor on, only their voices could give them away, and then only to people who knew them well. But there was no sense in taking any unnecessary risks. The fewer people that knew about a pair of Spartans being mobilized, the better â€" especially on a mission like this.

"She's fully loaded with her standard weapons â€" cannons and Archer missile pods â€" and she's also carrying a Shiva nuclear warhead. We prefer that you don't use it, but," Tannery shrugged, "if worst comes to worst, we want you to be able to give the Covenant something to worry about."

"Understood," John replied.

"Your first set of orders are encrypted on the fighter's computer," the General went on. "They'll be unlocked when you make your first slip jump."

"First set?" Linda asked.

"It's a complicated mission. You'll understand when you get the orders. Now, you'd better get going. At this point, time is on our side, but we don't know how long that will last. We need to move quickly."

"Yes, sir," John answered, saluting, as Linda did the same.

Tannery returned the salute. "Good luck."

They turned and walked up the boarding ramp into the Longsword, and set about stowing their gear. It was not an easy challenge; the fighter was not designed to serve as an assault ship, and the Spartans had as much gear as any six Marines. But eventually, everything was either locked up in stowage compartments, or securely tied down to the deck and bulkheads. Once that was done, they donned their armor again; they didn't necessarily need it right away, but John was a firm believer in not taking any chances that didn't need to be taken. Even if the fighter lost atmospheric containment, their suits would keep them alive for at least a few minutes — a few minutes which they could use to find a solution to the problem.

"Remember how to fly this thing?" Cortana piped as John settled into the pilot's seat.

"Of course," he replied, missing the humor in her voice. "Go ahead and patch into the systems. Pay special attention to monitoring our sensors. I don't want anything sneaking up on us while we're out there."

"I'm on it," she said, and lights started flickering on the control consoles as she accessed the fighter's systems.

John glanced over at Linda. "Make sure our weapons are primed," he ordered. "Don't set them to active yet. I don't want their signatures to give us away to any Covenant scans."

"Copy that," Linda replied, typing in the appropriate activation authorization sequences.

"Cortana, what's our Shiva warhead mounted on?" John asked.

"Checking," the AI replied. "We're equipped with one Mark II Shiva warhead, mounted on a Standard Archer solid fuel cell flight frame, equipped with Type B thrusters."

"So it packs a punch, but it's slow," John muttered. "Anything other than a point-blank shot would leave it vulnerable to getting picked off."

"Well, hopefully it won't come to that," Cortana said. "Remember, the whole idea is not to put ourselves in a situation where we have to use it."

"All the same," he countered, "I would have been happier with a grav-accel frame, or at least Type A thrusters."

"Beggars can't be choosers now, can they?" Cortana retorted wryly.

John grunted. "Seems like we're getting a lot more of the beggar's position of late, and a lot less of the chooser's." He switched on the Longsword's navigation and flight control systems. "Looks like General Tannery has already gotten us our launch clearance," he said

as he glanced over at Linda. "That will make our departure that much quieter. Systems check?"

"All sensors reading green, Chief," the female Spartan answered. "We're ready to go."

"Cortana?"

"All personnel are clear," she said. "Opening launch bay doors now."

John looked up through the canopy of the fighter. Directly in front of them, the massive doors to the launch bay ground open, sliding back to either side on huge tracks. On the life support console to John's left, a light switched from green to red as the sensors indicated that the bay was now a vacuum. Beyond the doors, the red arc of Mars' northern hemisphere was stark against the sable backdrop of space.

"Flight control has verified our clearance and has given us an outbound vector on course 213," Cortana instructed. "Hold on a moment. That can't be right. My scans indicate there's an entire battle group heading out on that vector."

John's fingers danced across the console, giving power to the thrusters, and with a low whine, the Longsword rose from the deck and eased forward toward the bay doors and the open space beyond.

"What are you doing?" Cortana exclaimed. "We need to get a clear vector!"

As soon as the fighter left the bay, he brought the main engines online, and the whine changed to a roar as the fighter accelerated away from the station. Seconds later, three more Longswords slid in next to them on matching courses, and together they joined the battle group formation.

"A single Longsword headed out of the system is going to raise questions," he said. "And I'd rather those questions never get a chance to reach Covenant ears." He nodded toward the ships spread out in front of them. "This is our cover. We'll stay on course 213, until we can quietly slip away."

"I'd still recommend changing course at least twice once we're clear of them," the AI replied.

"Agreed," John said.

The Longsword continue to accelerate, keeping in tight formation with the other fighters and light capital ships around them. By the time they'd reached normal cruising speed, they had left Mars well behind, and the asteroid belt was looming large on the three-dimensional readout of the sensor inputs. The range started to drop quickly, and the numbers changed from green to yellow. A collision alert started to beep, warning of the closing distance. Then the numbers flashed red.

Suddenly, the fighter directly ahead of them tipped its wings briefly left to right, and its running lights flashed for a split second as the entire battle group peeled away hard to port. John gripped the

controls tighter as the first flanks of the asteroid belt rose ahead of them, and held his course.

"Cortana, did you catch that?" he asked.

"Got it," she replied. "That fluctuation in his running lights was accelerated Morse code. Replaying now." She was silent for a moment. "It reads, 'Marks sends his regards. Godspeed.'"

John nodded. "Looks like the Admiral has all the bases covered. Hold on. We'll make our first course change once we're inside the belt."

During the first few decades of Earth's space colonization era, the Sol system asteroid belt had been extensively mined, blown apart, or simply towed away as hordes of eager colonists descended upon it to use its raw materials for the dozens of new settlements that were springing up all across the solar system. If anything, the activity had only made the area more dangerous, for large asteroids had been broken into multiple smaller ones, and others had been pushed into erratic orbits. And there were always bits and pieces of abandoned equipment and deserted asteroid bases to watch out for.

John was forced to decelerate as the Longsword approached the belt, and he carefully watched the sensors as they eased closer to the whirling, careening hulks of broken rock and ice.

"Would you like me to take over?" Cortana asked. "I can see in every direction at once, unlike you."

John shook his head. "I've got it."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

The AI gave an approximation of a sigh of exasperation. "Men."

The comment was meant for Linda, but the female Spartan just tightened her crash harness, and kept her attention on the sensor readouts.

John rolled the Longsword onto its starboard side " relative to the elliptic plane " and slid the craft in between two mountains of stone and ice as they rumbled by. They were so close that their gravitic forces made the space craft shake slightly, and behind the cockpit, the gear started to rattle within its restraints.

"Better double check some of that gear," John said, gesturing with one hand over his shoulder. "Turn your magnetic clamps on; I can't turn off the artificial gravity without getting disoriented."

"Wouldn't be a problem if I was flying," Cortana said.

"I've got it."

Linda switched on the magnetic clamps in her boots through the HUD in her helmet, then unfastened her crash harness and made her way aft. Her footsteps made heavy thumping noises as her half-ton suit of

armor magnetically attached itself to the deck with each step.

John pitched the fighter into another hairpin turn, arcing around another asteroid and rolling out of the turn to glide over a second, then dive under a third. "Coming to course 337," he announced.

Behind him, Linda was busily tightening the straps that held down their gear.

"Watch out," Cortana cautioned.

"I see them," John replied. He risked a quick glance over his shoulder at Linda. "Hold on."

Ahead of them, a trio of asteroids were careening toward one another, creating an ever-narrowing gap between them. They were massive, easily as large as small moons. There was no way the fighter could go around them at its present speed. It was either slow down to a near stop and let the imminent collision take place ahead of them, or

"Don't even think about it!" Cortana warned.

John didn't reply, but snapped the fighter into an inverted dive, accelerating straight for the gap between the stone mammoths.

Behind him, Linda was hanging upside down from the deck by her boots, but she kept working calmly.

As soon as the fighter drew level with the quickly closing opening, John brought it out of its dive, and gunned the engines, unleashing the full power of its mighty twin thrusters. The whole ship started to shake again as the gravity of the monoliths before them reached out like invisible hands grasping at a toy. Proximity warning lights started to flash on the control readouts.

"That opening is getting really small, Chief," Cortana said.

"I can see that."

The Longsword bounded and dove and tried to spin out of control as it plowed deeper into the gravitic turbulence, and the hull started creaking around them from the stresses.

"We're not going to make it!" Cortana exclaimed.

"We'll make it," John replied calmly.

"We're not going to make it!" the AI repeated.

"Hold on," was his reply.

Linda finally turned around to see what Cortana was so animated about. Her expression was unreadable behind her helmet's faceplate, but she stopped what she was doing and took hold of one of the cargo straps with both hands as she saw exactly how large the asteroids were.

"Here we go," John said.

The light of the sun behind them was blotted out as the fighter streaked into the narrow channel between the asteroids. The proximity alarms continued to shriek with growing insistence as the walls of stone closed about them.

At first, it was just a matter of guiding the Longsword straight down the gauntlet, but as it closed, smaller pieces of rock " satellites that had orbited the larger ones " quickly became a hazard as they darted back and forth, their orbits destroyed by the changing gravity of the impending cataclysm.

John started weaving the craft back and forth, dodging the rocks and chunks of ice as if they were missiles. Some of the smaller ones pinged off the hull, giving the collision alarms fits, but he charged onward. It was too late to go back now.

"Collision in twenty seconds, Chief!" Cortana exclaimed. "And we've still got a long way to go! Almost two thousand kilometers to be exact!"

John didn't answer, but instead engaged the emergency thrusters, giving the Longsword an extra burst of speed. His fingers deftly moved over the controls, taking the fighter craft into a spin followed by a trio of short, tight turns that took it around a series of jagged peaks that partially blocked the gap like rows of teeth.

Cortana brought up a holographic display and overlaid it on the forward canopy of the cockpit, showing how much time was left until the asteroids would crush them, and how far they still had to go, as well as highlighting in bright green a suggested route through the growing number of obstacles.

"Almost there!" the AI said.

John darted the fighter under another jagged spine of stone, brought it up just enough to slip over another

"Coming from starboard!" Cortana yelled.

John glanced right just in time to see yet another piece of rock " this one easily as big as the fighter " careening toward them. He looked back at his readouts, evaluating his options in the matter of a heartbeat. He had no room to go to port, away from the new collision threat, no room to dive, and another horizontal spire was quickly closing off what little space he had above. A nanosecond later, he acted, pulling the controls back and bringing the Longsword up and over the hurtling boulder, then pushing it back to level with no time to spare.

The narrow opening between the boulder and the spire was just a millimeter too small. The fighter jerked hard as it lost its forward momentum, slamming John into his crash harness. Sparks flew from the control panels, the engines sputtered and roared, and yet more alarms wailed.

And then it was through, jetting out into open space, leaving behind a half millimeter of armor from both its upper and lower fuselage.

John turned to check on Linda, and found her clamped securely to the ceiling. He cocked his head to one side in puzzlement. She just shrugged in reply.

"Well," Cortana huffed, "I hope you got your kicks for the day out of that."

It was John's turn to shrug. "At least now I know no one is following us."

"You did that on purpose?"

John faced forward again and leaned back in his seat. "I never fly like that by accident."

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4. Chapter 4: Rendezvous

****Author's Notes: ****I apologize that it has taken me so long to get this chapter up, but with the Holidays and the fact that I was writing entirely by hand while advising my brother how to kick rear in Battle Front II delayed me somewhat.

This chapter is dedicated to my younger brother David, who will be entering Marine Corps Basic Training in two days. You always were a fighter, David. Take it to 'em on land; I'll be watching your back from the sea.

****0715, October 2, 2552:****

As General Tannery had indicated, the Longsword's onboard computer indicated that a new order file had been unlocked minutes after they had made their jump to slip space. John had plotted a random outbound vector as soon as they'd left the Sol system, one that would drop them in empty space approximately a quarter of a light year away. As soon as they made the transition back to normal space he brought the file up on his main display. It was a visual file, and General Tannery's face was frozen on the screen for a moment before the recording started playing.

"Master Chief, by now you've made your first slip jump, and it's too late to turn back." He chuckled a bit. "Not that you would want to anyway. I hope you aren't headed directly for the Eridanus system just yet, because you're going to make a little detour. Now, I know you can probably handle this one on your own, but someone somewhere wearing ONI brass would feel better if you brought some leathernecks along for the ride. You're to meet them at these coordinates." A set of coordinates flashed in green at the lower right corner of the display.

"Now, these guys aren't mine. They're under Colonel Haversdam out of the 4th battalion. I don't know anything about them, but most of them are experienced in combat against the Covenant, and Haversdam assures me they're his best. Understand that they have not yet been briefed on the mission, so they're currently in the dark. Tell them whatever you think they need to know.

"Once you rendezvous with them, continue to your primary objective. That said, good luck, Master Chief. I'll see you when you get back to the Sol System. Tannery out."

The General's visage disappeared, leaving only the UNSC crest rotating slowly on a black screen above the new coordinates.

"Cortana, where are those coordinates at?" John asked as he brought the fighter around to the new heading.

"Checking," the AI replied. "Oooh, that will take us to a nice piece of space about five light years away from anything. Closest real estate is the Hades system. Been there, Chief?"

"No, and from what I hear, I'm just as glad that we're staying well away from it," he said.

"Not scared, are you?" Cortana put in wryly.

"Just concerned about saving the taxpayers' money when it comes to armor repairs and AI replacement," he answered.

"TouchÃ©," she muttered.

"Nav computer has accepted the new coordinates, Chief," Linda interrupted their banter.

"Right then, John said. "Here we go."

****1410, October 2, 2552****

****Approximately 5 Light Years from the Hades System:****

Their jump to the coordinates General Tannery had indicated took just under seven hours. They were over 62 light years from the Sol System, and as Cortana had indicated, the nearest star system was 5.013 light years away.

"Anything on sensors?" John queried.

"Nothing," Linda replied. "If Haversdam's Marines are out there, they're running silent â€" no lights, no engines."

"Hold on," Cortana interrupted. "I'm detecting a narrow beam laser directed at our receiver array."

"Trace it back," John ordered.

"Got 'em," the AI replied almost instantly. "Right there." A green wire-frame hologram was overlaid on the canopy, forming the rough shape of a distant Pelican personnel transport.

"Linda, get us a beam of our own."

"Aye, aye, Chief." Linda tapped orders into the communications console, and it beeped back at her, indicating that a return beam had been established. Now, only a ship that happened to wander through the beams could eavesdrop on their communications. Of course, it also meant that both ships would have to remain relatively still, limiting

their maneuverability to almost nil, but out here, it probably wouldn't be an issue.

Nevertheless, John wasn't going to take any chances. "Keep an eye on the sensors," he told his fellow Spartan. "If anything at all comes into range, let me know."

"Copy."

"Longsword fighter, please state your identity," a level voice came over the comm.

"This is Master Chief Spartan 117," John replied. "We're here on the orders of General Tannery and Admiral Marks."

"Acknowledged," the other came back. "This is Gunnery Sergeant James Mitchell. Colonel Haversdam has assigned us to you for this mission, sir. Standing by for further orders."

"How many are you, Gunnery Sergeant?" John asked.

"Twenty-one, including myself," Mitchell replied.

"Armaments?"

"We're outfitted for ground assault, as well as hostile boarding actions. We've also been equipped with a civilian-civilian grade slip drive. We're slow, but we can get to wherever you need to go. The only thing we're lacking is a warthog," he added wryly.

"Understood," John said. "Standby." He switched the transmitter off, then turned to face Linda. "We're going to need an approach plan once we reach Eridanus."

"Sounds like Haversdam has them geared up appropriately," Cortana remarked.

"Agreed," Linda added, "but we don't want to put all our cards in one hand, so to speak. We should take both ships with us. And you and I should split up, Chief. If Mitchell is equipped for hostile boarding actions, his Pelican should have an extra airlock, topside. We can link up with them and transfer some people. That way, if one of us gets taken out before we land, the other can still carry out the mission."

"Good idea," John said. "Once we dock with the Pelican, I'll transfer over. I'll send a few Marines back here to take my place. This fighter has heavier fire power; I want to keep it in reserve, so you'll follow us in once we locate the Eternity. Stay directly on our six; if you keep close enough, the Covenant's sensors might mistake you for an echo."

"Got it," Linda said.

"Cortana, I'm going to transfer you over to the Longsword's hard drives until we land. If the Eternity's AI tries anything on the Pelican while we make our approach, you'll have more time to work on counteracting her from here."

"All right," Cortana replied, although she didn't sound happy with the idea.

John switched the transmitter back on. "Pelican, stand by to initiate docking procedure."

Fifteen minutes later, the two space craft were securely attached to each other. Cortana had handled most of the more intricate maneuvers and calculations, but it had still been a tricky process.

As soon as the airlock lights flashed green, indicating a secure seal between the Longsword and the Pelican's topside airlock, John made his way over. Both ships had their own artificial gravity enabled, but the short tube between them had zero gee. He fought a momentary sense of nausea as the gravity around him shifted twice in just a few seconds.

He pulled himself into the Pelican and dropped to the deck to find a young female Marine waiting for him. For a moment, she just gaped at him, swallowing hard; then she shook herself and snapped to attention. "Lance Corporal Amber Dupont," she said breathlessly. "It's an honor to meet you, sir. Welcome aboard."

John nodded in return, taking a quick moment to study Dupont. She was little more than a girl, with green eyes that were still innocent, and cinnamon hair that was probably longer than the specs called for. He doubted she was even of legal age to be a Marine, but these days, the Corps was willing to take anyone that could make it through basic training. At least she seemed to know what she was about; she was already geared up in full battle armor, except for her helmet, and she was carrying her battle rifle slung over one shoulder, ready for action.

"Lance Corporal, get together five people and have them report to the Longsword," he said. "Make sure one of them has AI quals and another knows demolitions. As soon as that's done, report back to me."

Dupont nodded smartly. "Yes, sir." She turned and regarded the other Marines who were gathered in the rear compartment. As John made his way toward the cockpit, he heard her start calling out names.

John tapped the controls for the cockpit door, then stepped inside as it slid open. Gunnery Sergeant Mitchell was sitting at the pilot's station and glanced up at the Master Chief. Like most senior enlisted Marines these days, he showed signs of countless hours of combat. He wasn't old, but his hair was graying prematurely, and he had several scars crisscrossing his face. His gray eyes constantly darted back and forth, as if he was expecting an attack from any direction.

Mitchell glanced at the woman beside him in the co-pilot's chair. "If you'll excuse us for a moment, Sergeant," he said quietly.

The Sergeant nodded and stood, but there was a bitter look in her eyes as she slipped past John and left the compartment.

As soon as she was gone, John took a seat and strapped himself in.

"You'll have to excuse her, Master Chief," Mitchell said after a moment of silence. "Just after the war began, a Navy drop ship crew panicked and took off without orders during a firefight when an insertion op went bad. She was still onboard, but they left a lot of her friends behind, none of whom made it out alive."

"I see," John said simply.

"So, what's our mission?" Mitchell asked in an obvious bid to change the subject.

John gave him the quick version of what Admiral Marks had briefed him on. "We're headed to the Eridanus system," he finished. "Most of the mission will probably be concentrated on the Eternity herself; that's why Tannery wanted you and your people here."

Mitchell nodded slowly. "Sounds like we're in for a party," he said. "Never had the chance to board a Covenant cruiser before."

The cockpit door slid open, and Dupont stuck her head in, vainly trying to push back locks of her too-long cinnamon hair. "Good to go, Master Chief," she piped. "Your AI lady said they're ready on their end."

"Good," John said as he started punching the coordinates for Eridanus into the nav computer. He glanced over his shoulder to see the girl still standing there. "Is there anything else?"

"Uh, well, I â€" she started.

"Go strap in, Lance Corporal," Mitchell said with a small grin.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, then disappeared back into the troop compartment.

"Now that one's a completely different story from Sergeant Avery," Mitchell chuckled once she was gone. "She's a fan of the Spartans, you might say. I think you've picked up a new admirer."

"She have any combat experience?" John asked, not particularly caring what Dupont might think of him.

"Not a bit," Mitchell responded, grimly this time. "Been in the Corps less than four months. They never should have let her join. She's way too young. She's a darn good shot with that battle rifle of hers, though. Ironically, she can't shoot worth Grunt spit with a sniper carbine, but her enthusiasm more than makes up for it."

"Let's just hope that enthusiasm doesn't get her killed," John said. "We'll need level heads where we're going."

Moments later, the two ships were undocked, and they made the jump to slip space.

****Author's Notes: ****Well, I know I had said I'd get this out sooner. Unfortunately, Navy life is considerably busier than I had anticipated, especially now that I'm going out to sea at least two or three times a month. But, I've finally finished this chapter, and I've also made considerable headway into Chapter Six. I can't make any promises on that one though. Now that I've gotten Chapter Five up, I'm going to go back and correct those mistakes I made in earlier chapters, and put the revised versions back up. I discussed in detail what changes I was going to make, and you can read up on them in the Halo forum, Halo: Echoes of Eternity.

In the meantime, enjoy Chapter Five, and thanks for your patience!

****2330, October 2, 2552** **Eridanus System:****

This time, the trip was longer. Most of the Marines either dozed in their seats or carefully cleaned their various weapons in a meticulous routine that was designed to keep their minds busy. An air of calm had settled over the Pelican. Even Mitchell stared quietly out at the scintillating lights of slip space, apparently lost in thought.

But for the Master Chief, every minute seemed to take forever. Even though he appeared outwardly calm, his mind was furiously working over dozens of different scenarios, trying to make sure that he'd be ready, that no matter what happened after they dropped out of slip space and boarded the Eternity, he'd have a plan of action. Several of the possibilities he came up with were bloody, but he'd been fighting for too long to simply dismiss them. Everything had to be consideredâ€| even the nightmares.

"Coming up on the Eridanus system," Mitchell's voice broke into his thoughts. "We'll be dropping back to normal space in fifteen."

John nodded wordlessly and reached up to flip on the intercom to the aft compartment. "Fifteen minutes until reversion to normal space," he said calmly. "Make sure all your gear is ready to go, and then strap in. We don't know what kind of welcome we're going to be in for. Have your air breathers ready; the planet has an atmosphere, but the air levels are too low for you to breathe for very long."

Before he'd even finished talking, the Marines had launched into a flurry of last minute checks and rechecks, moving with the hurried calm that experienced soldiers displayed just before entering combat. Minutes later, all of them were strapped in their seats and ready to go.

"Here we go," Mitchell said. He took a deep breath, then dropped the Pelican out of slip space.

As it almost always was, the reversion was anti-climactic. There were no bolts of plasma already streaking out to meet them, no screeching alarms warning them of hostile contacts, no comm chatter filtering in from dead or dying UNSC vessels.

There was only silenceâ€| and empty space.

For John, it was the first time in a long time that he'd entered a

system that wasn't already firmly in UNSC control, and hadn't been called into a firefight almost immediately. It was an eerie change, and " for the battle-hardened Spartan " vaguely disturbing. And yet, deep down inside, he welcomed it.

Too bad it was only an illusion.

"I've got Eridanus II on sensors," Mitchell reported, "but your coordinates dropped us almost two light minutes out."

"I know," John replied. "We've got something to check first."

The Gunnery Sergeant looked like he was about to ask the obvious question, then thought better of it and kept silent.

John's coordinates had, just as Mitchell said, dropped them about two light minutes from the planet's current location. Before it was lost in a long and bloody battle with the Covenant, Eridanus II had boasted a defense network that could detect ships dropping out of slip space almost ten light minutes out. But that entire network had been wiped out, and the Covenant hadn't replaced it with their own sensor net. That meant that any Covenant ship in the system would have to rely on its own sensors. The best sensor suites could detect other ships at three to four light minutes, and there was no doubt that the Echoes of Eternity was equipped with the best. But she was down and damaged, and any scans she was able to make would be distorted by what was left of Eridanus II's atmosphere.

It was still a gamble, but one that had to be taken.

Approximately three minutes after their reversion to real space, the Pelican's passive sensors picked up the galactic survey probe that had logged the Eternity's arrival not so long ago. John wanted to see if there'd been any more Covenant activity in the system. If there hadn't been, it would make the mission a whole lot easier. If there had been— things would get ugly.

"Head for that probe," he told Mitchell, tapping the probe's blinking icon on the sensor display.

As Mitchell started to guide the Pelican toward the probe, John opened a channel to the Longsword that was trailing them.

"Cortana."

"Go ahead, Master Chief," came the AI's voice.

"As soon as we're in range of the galactic survey probe, I want you to hack into its systems and download its sensor logs," he said. "Send a copy of them to the Pelican's hard drives. Once that's done, update its profile lists with the most recent intel that we have on Covenant vessels, and rewrite its reporting protocols so that it reports any Covenant activity directly to us, instead of the UNSC Science Council."

"Well, you're easy to please, aren't you?" Cortana returned wryly.

"Is that too much for you?" John asked nonchalantly.

"I'm already done," she answered haughtily. "No further Covenant activity is logged."

"All right, then. Give us a beacon on the _Eternity's_ position."

A yellow icon started flashing on the sensor display even as the words left his mouth.

"Already one step ahead of you," Cortana said. Her voice made it clear that, if she'd been in holographic form at the moment, she'd be grinning.

"I see it. Once we attain the correct approach vector, we'll cut our engines and coast in, to minimize the chance that we'll be spotted. We'll keep them powered down until we enter atmosphere. Maintain radio silence from here on in. We'll see you dirtside."

"And here I was hoping to have the pleasure of your engaging conversation," she quipped. "You got it, Chief. Cortana out."

"She always like that?" Mitchell asked as he brought the Pelican around towards the new coordinates on the planet's surface.

The Master Chief was quiet for a moment, then nodded. "Pretty much."

At half a million kilometers out from the planet, Mitchell cut the Pelican's engines. Behind them, Linda did the same with the Longsword's. The two ships used their momentum to coast in toward Eridanus II; if they were picked up on any sensor scans at all, they'd look like space debris. Linda used the Longsword's attitude thrusters to make small adjustments to her trajectory, tucking the fighter in close behind and beneath the Pelican. Then the craft's energy signature faded, little more than a ghost even on the Pelican's sensors.

"I estimate we'll hit atmosphere in about ten minutes," Mitchell said as he checked his navigation readouts. "Of course, we'll have to bring our engines back online if we don't want to crash and burn, but if we're lucky â€"

"Hold on," John said, holding up a hand as something flashed on his sensor readout. A second later, there was another, brighter flash.

"What is it?" Mitchell asked, leaning over to take a closer look.

"We just got pinged," the Master Chief replied. "Looks like _Eternity_ is taking an interest in us."

The Gunnery Sergeant breathed a curse. "She's got a better sensor suite than we thought. Should we bring engines back up?"

"No, not yet. She knows we're here, but she may not be able to identify us. The moment she tries something though, we go in, full burn."

"Got it," Mitchell nodded, his finger already poised over the engine

ignition switches.

Keeping an eye on the sensor display, John started tapping commands into the communications console.

"What are you doing?" Mitchell asked.

"Locking down our comms," he replied. "_Eternity_ doesn't have any way to communicate with the Covenant, so she'll use ours if she can." Hopefully, Linda would be doing the same thing with the Longsword's comm equipment.

"And what if she can't use it?"

"She'll get mad."

"Great."

Silence settled over the cockpit again as John finished with the communications console and continued to watch the sensors. Mitchell watched him, waiting for the signal to re-ignite the engines. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. The sensor readout remained quiet; there were no more probes from Eternity, and the icon marking her location slowly drew closer.

"Atmosphere in five," Mitchell said quietly. "Maybe she â€" He was interrupted by a chirping alarm from the communications console.

It was the unauthorized access warning.

"She made us!" John exclaimed. "Go, go, go!"

The Pelican's engines roared as Mitchell hit the ignition switches, and they were thrust back into their seats as the transport sprang forward. The Longsword's icon flared to life a split second later, riding their exhaust hard, so close that it was probably losing paint in their flame trail.

"Atmosphere in sixty seconds!" Mitchell called.

Another alarm started screaming, one that echoed through both the cockpit and the troop bay. Red lights lit up across several different consoles, and a handful of other alarms quickly joined it.

"We don't have sixty seconds," John replied grimly. "She's overriding our engine core safety interlocks. Our failsafes just went down. Shut down the engines."

"You mean go ballistic?" Mitchell asked in disbelief. "From this high up, that's suicide!"

"Either that, or we blow up in about ten seconds," John returned. "Core temperatures are already way too high."

Mitchell ground out a curse, but he shut the engines down, the locked out the controls. "All right, then, you better hold on," he warned, "'cause this is gonna get rough! Attitude thrusters won't help much. Atmosphere in ten!"

"Brace for ballistic entry," John warned over the intercom. The

Marines should already be strapped in, but he wanted to make sure none of them got any bright ideas about securing loose gear at the last minute.

The Pelican bucked hard as it punched through the uppermost level of the planet's atmosphere a moment later. Fortunately, Mitchell had already lined the craft up on an appropriate approach vector, else it could have bounced right back into space, ricocheting from the denser layers of gases like a stone skipped off the surface of a pond. At the moment, John wasn't sure what would be worse: getting stuck in orbit, waiting for Eternity to find a way to kill them, or risking being obliterated while trying to land on a planet's surface some thirty miles below them without the use of engines.

Mitchell cursed as the controls were wrenched from his hands, and the dropship started to roll. John punched a command sequence into his console, and activated the co-pilot's station. He took hold of the control yoke, trying to keep the craft from flipping over, struggling even with the aid of his MJOLNIR armor. Mitchell did what he could from his own station, lending his strength.

It was enough to keep the Pelican from rolling, barely.

Just when they thought they had control, the craft tried to go into a dive. They managed to bring the nose up, even as it started to drift to starboard, threatening to put the dropship into a slide.

"We're going to lose our stabilizers!" Mitchell said as the groan of severely strained metal alloy echoed through the cockpit. "These things aren't exactly the most aerodynamic. They weren't designed for ballistic re-entries!"

"Use the attitude thrusters," John instructed calmly. The controls trembled violently in his iron grip, fighting him the entire way as he brought the Pelican out of its slide.

"We're going way too fast! We need the main engines!"

"If we ignite them this high up, Eternity will turn us into a miniature supernova," John responded. "We'll use them at the last minute to slow our velocity. Don't start them until I give the word."

Mitchell very much looked like he wanted to start them now, but he wiped sweat from his forehead with one sleeve of his gray battle fatigues, nodded grimly, and concentrated on using the attitude thrusters to keep the Pelican from careening completely out of control.

John glanced at his sensor readouts, and was gratified to see that the Longsword was still with them. Even though it was larger than the Pelican, it was more aerodynamic. It was mimicking the smaller dropship's erratic flight path so precisely that there was no doubt Cortana was the one doing the flying now. The fighter was staying so close that, even if Eternity knew there were two ships, she'd have a hard time getting a sensor lock on the fighter.

As the Pelican's velocity continued to increase, John kept a careful eye on its altitude. If they could ignite their main engines at approximately one thousand meters, they should be able to slow down

enough to keep their landing from being fatal.

As the dropship fell ever deeper into the vestiges of the planet's atmosphere, wind started to howl around it, and control became even more difficult. The seconds passed with agonizing slowness while the ground began to rush up at them.

"Five thousand meters," Mitchell ground through clenched teeth as the craft rolled onto its port side. "I won't be able to keep control with the thrusters much longer! Our velocity is too high!"

"Just a few more seconds," John muttered.

At their current speed, a few more seconds was all they had.

A high-pitched shriek echoed through the cockpit, the sound of metal actually being torn like a piece of paper, and the Pelican started to spin like a top on its vertical axis. The sky turned into a wheeling, nauseating whirlpool, and the horizon that was rushing toward them became nothing more than a blurred line. A moment later, Eridanus II's surface was looming large, filling the entire canopy.

John glanced at the altimeter just in time to see it hit one thousand.

"Power up the engines, now!" he commanded.

Mitchell hit the ignition switches. The dropship's powerful engines sputtered for a moment, then howled to life. The Marine was already pulling up on his control yoke, and the Master Chief joined him, hauling back as hard as he could. The vector thrusters responded immediately, aiming the thrust output of the engines straight down to slow the craft. But it was too little, too late.

The craft was still spinning wildly, but John could see that the ground was far too close, and it was getting closer way too fast. He could see individual outcroppings of obsidian rock now, and that meant it was too late to make a safe landing.

"Brace for impact!" he shouted over the comm.

The echoes of his voice hadn't even finished sounding from the speakers in the troop bay when the Pelican slammed down, and the world went dark.

6. Chapter 6: Gear Up

****Authors Notes:** **Sorry this one has taken so long to get out. I was working on finishing my Republic Commando fanfic. Anyway, this one is now the sole focus of my attention, so hopefully, future updates will show up a bit quicker. I hope you enjoy.

This chapter is dedicated to Marine Recruit Michael J. Durkin, who went to Marine Boot Camp on October 23rd, 2006. He is my youngest brother. Now there's three of us in the Armed Forces. If I were the bad guys, I'd be watching my back very, very carefullyâ€¦

****0423, October 3, 2552, Local Time**

> Surface of Eridanus II:

"Chief? Chief?" The voice was distant and hazy, and at first, John didn't pay it any mind. It was too far away to concern him for now. He was too busy trying to claw his way out of the black fog that gripped his mind. But the maddeningly familiar voice was persistent. "Chief? Can you hear me?" He latched onto the voice with what little mental awareness he had, and he found that focusing on it helped. He couldâ€| almostâ€| moveâ€| "Are you guys alive in there!?"

He jerked upright, reaching up to undo his crash harness as he finally recognized the voice. "Cortana," he managed to get out.

"Chief!" the AI exclaimed. The relief in her voice was audible. "Thank goodness! For a moment, I thought we'd lost all of you in there. What's your status?"

"Assessing now. Standby," he replied, managing to keep most of the grogginess out of his voice.

He looked around quickly, trying to take stock of the situation. The Pelican hadn't broken apart in the crash; in fact, it appeared relatively intact, at least from the inside. He shouldn't have been knocked unconscious by the crash, but then he realized what had happened. One of his crash harness straps had failed, and his helmeted head had slammed forward into his control console. There was a gaping hole in the console; it was far beyond any repair, and would be useless to them now. He ran a quick systems check on his armor, and a series of green lights flashed on his HUD.

"I'm good to go," he said to Cortana. "I'm checking the Marines now."

"All right," she replied. "I'm sending Linda over with a medpack to help out. She'll be there in two."

"Copy."

John pushed himself out of his seat, and moved over to where Mitchell was slumped in his chair. Fortunately, the Gunnery Sergeant's crash harness had held, and the man appeared to be merely unconscious. He stirred a bit and muttered irritably as John shook his shoulder gently before prying open the jammed troop bay door.

The troop bay had fared slightly worse than the cockpit. Gear had broken loose and was scattered all over the place, weapons, armor, ammunition, sensor gear, food supplies. It took him only a second to learn that at least one of the Marines was dead. Her seat was on the starboard side of the craft, which was currently almost directly overhead, thanks to the angle at which the Pelican was laying. She'd been skewered with what looked like a support bar that had punched inward into the bay. It had gone straight through her back armor and protruded out of her breastplate by nearly a meter. Her eyes were wide open, and the expression of shocked pain would forever be etched on her face.

A few of the other Marines were stirring, and some were cursing rather colorfully, but John was grateful to hear it. It meant that they were alive and in one piece. He found Sergeant Avery, who was

slowly coming around. He pulled the case of shotgun ammo off her lap, then moved on.

At the rear of the bay, he found Lance Corporal Dupont. Her eyes were open and staring, straight up, and for a brief moment, he feared the worst. But then he saw that she was trembling violently, arms clutched desperately over her chest as if she was still bracing for the crash. He followed her frozen, horrified gaze, and realized that she had been seated directly across from the dead Marine, who was now right above her. Droplets of the woman's blood were spattering across Dupont's face and helmet. For the rookie, it was no doubt the most horrific thing she'd ever seen.

John quickly stepped over in front of her, shielding her from the sight of her dead companion. "Lance Corporal," he said quietly, trying to soften his voice just a little. "Are you all right?"

Dupont started, as if she hadn't seen him at first. "Master Chief!" she sobbed in painfully obvious relief. "I â€" I t-thought everyone was d-dead! I c-can't moveâ€" my â€" my harness is jammedâ€" Iâ€" Her eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp as the shock of what she'd just experienced finally overwhelmed her, and blessed unconsciousness took her, if only for a little while.

John had seen it happen before. Plenty of new Marines witnessed their friends get slaughtered right in front of their eyes, but no one he'd ever seen was as young as Dupont. This sort of thing probably made her nightmares look tame. He bent down to snap her harness release with one hand, then gently pulled her out of her seat and picked her up.

Something heavy thumped on the closed troop bay loading doors, once, twice, three times.

"Master Chief, I'm just outside," Linda's voice came over John's comm. "Make sure you've all got your air breathers on, then if you can, get the loading ramp down so I can give you a hand."

"Standby," John replied. "Everyone, get your air breathers on. We're going to have to open the doors." He set Dupont down and pulled hers out of her pack, then slipped it on over her nose and mouth. He made sure the hose was attached to the air cylinder that was strapped to the pack itself, then activated it. By the time he was done and had picked the Lance Corporal back up, the other Marines had finished with theirs as well.

"I've got the ramp," Mitchell said as he stumbled past the Spartan. He hit the loading door release, and then the ramp release. The Pelican's onboard computer took twice as long as it should have to ponder the request, but then it finally initialized the process, and the door groaned open. The ramp refused to extend, but as it was, it didn't really matter. The dropship had buried itself over a meter into the dirt, so there was no clearance between the troop bay deck and the ground.

Linda stepped inside, carrying the medpack in one hand. She immediately started toward the dead Marine.

"Don't bother," John said quietly, and his counterpart stopped in

mid-step. "She's gone."

Linda nodded solemnly, her expression hidden by her helmet, and she stepped over to another Marine that was still stuck in his seat.

John stepped out of the troop bay onto the dark, barren surface of Eridanus II. He glanced around carefully, searching for any signs of danger. Since it had been glassed, the planet itself could now be a threat, he realized. Most of its atmosphere had been burned away in its destruction, and the current air levels wouldn't be able to support a Human for very long. That was why they'd donned their air breathers. The equipment would be vulnerable in a fight, but it ensured that the Marines would actually be able to fight should the Covenant threaten them.

He spotted the Longsword, intact and sitting level on its landing gear less than a hundred meters away. The Marines that had been onboard had formed a perimeter around it, and were watching the surrounding terrain warily. He saw nothing else.

"Put her down," came a voice from behind him, filtered through the small speaker of an air mask.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Sergeant Avery regarding him heatedly.

"I said put her down," she repeated. "She's a Marine; we take care of our own."

John glanced down at the girl in his arms. She was stirring slightly now, apparently suffering from no permanent harm. He set her down carefully on the hard packed obsidian that passed as the planet's soil now. "Relax," he said to the Sergeant. "I wanted to get her out of there before she came to again."

"Yeah, well, she wouldn't have been in there at all if it weren't for you and your Navy's stupid secret mission," Avery snapped. "I think you've helped quite enough."

Linda approached from behind Avery, and started to kneel to take a closer look at Dupont before John could warn her off. The Sergeant rounded on her. "Back off!" she all but shouted. "I'm taking care of her!"

"Stand down, Sergeant," Mitchell said firmly as he stepped out of the Pelican's troop bay. "Let her help. She's got the right gear."

"I can take care of her, sir," Avery answered heatedly.

"I said stand down," the Gunnery Sergeant returned. "That's an order."

The look in the woman's eyes was pure hatred as she stood and stepped back, openly glaring at Linda.

"Go help Trace with the ammo, Sergeant," Mitchell said. "Now," he added as Avery started to protest. He shook his head slowly as she headed back into the Pelican. "She'll be all right," he assured the Spartans. "She's just shaken up."

John watched her go, hoping that she wouldn't prove to be trouble further into this mission. He understood her anger, and even her pain, but people with her attitude made it hard for teams to work together, and teams that didn't work together died together. "Make sure everyone's ready to go in ten minutes," he said aloud. "Linda, once you're done with Dupont, take a look at what weapons we've got left. We need to know what we're working with." He glanced at Mitchell. "Come with me. Let's take a look at what we're up against."

The Master Chief and the Gunnery Sergeant drifted away from the others, headed for a jagged outcropping of obsidian.

"If there're still any Covenant left alive onboard that thing," Mitchell said quietly, "it's a good bet they know we're here." He crouched behind the outcropping next to the Spartan, sighting through the scope of his battle rifle toward the warped hulk of the _Eternity_. "Our entrance was kind of hard to miss."

John brought his MA5B up, making his own study of the wreckage. The iridescent purple hull was just outside effective range for most of the Marines' weapons, but it was possible that a skilled Covenant could still pick them off with a plasma rifle. There were no signs of life amid the remains of the ruined starship as yet, but it was still intact enough that he would be surprised if that continued to hold true for much longer.

"We'll find out soon enough," he replied. He spared a quick glance back over his shoulder. The Marines were mostly recovered from the crash landing, relying on their training to stave off the shock of their brush with death. Even Lance Corporal Dupont was now stoically insisting that she was fine. "Cortana, what's our status?" he asked over his helmet's com.

"Just about done here, Chief," her voice came back. "As soon as Linda's done sending me an inventory of our serviceable weaponry, I'll have one of the Marines bring my chip to you."

"Copy." He turned back to Mitchell. "We'll have to leave a couple of your people here to watch the Longsword. The last thing we need is for the Covenant to take our only means of extraction."

The Gunnery Sergeant nodded. "I'll pick two. That's about all we can spare."

"Marksmen, if you've got them," he suggested. "We won't have much need for long range shooting inside the _Eternity_."

Mitchell nodded again, then eased out from behind his cover and hurried back to where the other Marines were finishing their last minute preparations.

A few minutes later, they were ready. A Marine brought Cortana's chip to John, and he installed it to his helmet. "All set with weapons, Chief," she reported. "We didn't lose anything we can't live without."

John opened up a com channel with the rest of the Marines. "If you're not locked and loaded, do it now," he said. "We're going to advance

on the Eternity under the assumption that the Covenant know we're here and are watching us. It's mostly open ground between here and there, so move fast, use what cover you can, and watch for incoming fire. A ship this size usually has a complement of Banshees onboard, so watch the skies." He paused to make sure there were no questions. "On my lead."

He brought his rifle up, making one last check to ensure it was loaded. "Ready?" he asked Cortana.

"You know it," she said, far more cheerfully than any human could have managed.

John glanced to his right as Linda stepped up next to him. She nodded at him to indicate she was ready, and he nodded back.

"Move," he said, and stepped out into the open.

7. Chapter 7: Forced Entry

****Author's Notes: ****Firstly, I apologize that this chapter has been so long in coming. Navy life for me has become increasingly hectic, and the only reason I had a chance to finish this chapter up now is because I'm on leave at home. It's a little short, but it gets the point across, and sets the stage for further plot development in the next chapter. I hope you will enjoy, and forgive my tardiness. Hopefully " though no guarantees " the next chapter won't take as long.

* * *

>0433, October 3, 2552, Local Time
 Surface of Eridanus II, 500 Meters from the Echoes of Eternity:**

John couldn't have asked for a worse approach to the downed Covenant cruiser. A grand total of six rocks the approximate size of large ammo cases were all the cover that was offered. They would protect a Marine from one shot from a plasma rifle. Two, if the Marine was lucky. The rest of the cover had been ground into powder by the force of the Eternity's fiery crash.

His instinct was to run across the open ground. If he were by himself, he would have done just that. He was almost twice as fast as the Marines, and his MJOLNIR could take several shots before he was in any real danger. Even the toughest Marine couldn't afford to take one.

That meant they had to close with the Eternity at a slower pace, which gave them a few advantages. It ensured the Marines would not be already exhausted and unable to fight by the time they reached the cruiser, just from trying to keep up with him. It also gave them more time to watch for Covenant movement " and make a well-placed shot, if the opportunity arose.

John had the sensitivity of his motion sensors set as high as it would go as he led the Marines out across the open ground, and his eyes were constantly moving behind the reflective gold faceplate of his helmet, scanning for anything that might present a threat. But even now, fifty meters closer to the Eternity, there was no sigh of

Covenant life. That worried him. Mitchell had been right; any aliens still onboard the ship could not have failed to miss the arrival of the Humans. The sonic boom from the ballistic re-entry of the Pelican alone would have attracted attention.

And unless something more than an ion storm and a crash landing had happened to the Eternity, there were still plenty of Covenant alive in there somewhere.

At two hundred fifty meters, John halted and brought his battle rifle up, scanning the wreckage from end to end.

"Looking for a way in?" Mitchell asked.

"Looking for the ambush," he replied bluntly. "Linda, did you bring your sniper rifle?"

"Of course," came the expected reply. The female Spartan peered through the more powerful scope of her own weapon for several moments. "No movement," she reported. "A lot of hull breaches though. Plenty of places to hide in."

"Maybe they lost atmospheric containment on the way down?" Mitchell suggested hopefully.

John shook his head. "The outer sectors, maybe, but blast doors would have sealed off the rest."

"Sir, I think I found a way in," came an eager voice just to John's left.

He glanced over and saw Lance Corporal Dupont sighting through her rifle scope. He followed her line of sight, and found what she was looking at.

It was a five-meter gash in the hull, at least as high as it was wide. It wasn't remarkable, considering the rest of the damage the ship had taken, but it was right at ground level, providing easy access into the outer corridors. John studied it for a quick moment, not wanting to linger any longer in the open. It looked clear. He signaled with his left hand, and they started moving again.

A hundred meters out, the Marines started getting edgy.

He couldn't blame them. They should have come under fire by now. Ordinarily, the lack of an attack would have been a good thing, but in a situation like this, it just meant that the surviving Covenant were up to something. He didn't like that idea, either.

Finally, the massive hulk of the downed cruiser was looming over them, covering them in its shadow. They entered a sort of false twilight as the sun disappeared behind the flowing, iridescent curves of the hull.

Moments later, they were approaching the hull breach they'd decided to use as their entrance. John could now see that there were several more gashed in the hull above it. Girders of metal alloy that had been ripped like paper in the force of the crash jutted downward like skeletal, alien fingers reaching for them.

"I'm on point," John said, still moving forward. He didn't want to be caught standing still this close. "The rest of you, fall in behind me. As soon as we're inside, Linda, cover right. Mitchell, cover left."

They didn't respond verbally, but took up their positions, most of their attention focused on their surroundings.

Three meters out from the breach, John activated his armor's floodlight, for only a split second. The brief flash was all he needed. Even as the light faded, the image of the interior was replaying itself in his mind. The hold opened up onto a corridor, filled with debris. But the breach had penetrated deeper into the ship, and there were more corridors beyond. And standing to one side, carefully pressed up against one bulkhead where it would be invisible in the darkness was a blue-armored Covenant Elite.

"Contact!" he warned, and everything seemed to go into slow motion as his faster reflexes kicked in. Even before he'd finished shouting his warning, he was bringing his battle rifle up and sighting in on the enemy. His gun barked once, and purple sprayed across the bulkhead behind the Elite as it took the round between the eyes. It hadn't even had time to activate its shields.

Behind him, the Marines started scrambling for the cover of the ship, but they were far too slow. Streaks of plasma started to drop toward them from a dozen different positions above them, drifting like deadly rain as the Covenant snipers tried to track their scattering prey.

"Go! Go! Go!" Mitchell's voice sounded distorted in the Master Chief's ears as his adrenaline kicked in and made him move even faster.

He sidestepped the Gunnery Sergeant, ducked a plasma burst, and sighted in on the Grunt that had fired at him. One shot sent the alien tumbling from its perch, but even its body seemed to fall slowly as John kept moving. The Marine in front of him took a shot to the chest and started falling backward, his rifle spraying a dozen rounds skyward as his finger convulsed on the trigger. John was past him before his body had even hit the ground, and another shot from his weapon killed the Jackal that had dropped the Human.

Behind him, Linda was moving just as fast. Her sniper rifle thundered, its supersonic round leaving a visible trail of super heated air in its wake as it flashed out to take an Elite through the chest. The armored foe was slammed into the bulkhead behind it before dropping with a gurgling wail.

Most of the Marines were running madly for the cover of the gash in the ship's hull, but John was surprised to see Dupont still out in the open. She was still standing in the same spot she had been six seconds ago when the shooting started. Just as he started to shout for her to move, she dropped to one knee and brought her rifle up. She fired a burst of three rounds, reacquired, then fired another burst. A Grunt toppled from its position three decks above the ground as the first burst punctured its armor, while the second burst spun another Grunt around and planted it face first in the dirt. Then Dupont was up and running, barely escaping a hail of blue fire that tracked her all the way to cover.

The Master Chief sidestepped the body of a Jackal the dropped from somewhere above, picked off by a shot from Linda, put two rounds into a red-armored Grunt on the deck above ground level, and then he was under cover with the rest of the Marines. Linda stepped in right behind him.

The silence was deafening as the Covenant abruptly stopped shooting. No doubt they were trying to reposition so they could get visuals on the Human intruders again.

The entire engagement had lasted less than twelve seconds.

"We have a man down," Cortana reported grimly.

"Status?" John asked.

"He's dead."

"We have to go get him," Mitchell said.

"Negative," Linda put in. "The Covenant have probably left snipers up there just in case we do exactly that. They know we come back for our dead."

"We can't just leave him laying out there!" Sergeant Avery put in vehemently.

"Enough!" John put in firmly. "We don't have time to stand around and debate. The Covenant are closing on our position as we speak. We need to keep moving. We'll come back for him before we leave the planet. For now, leave the dead where they fall. Now move out."

Keeping his rifle at the ready, he led the way deeper into the ship, following the gashes in the bulkheads until they were several corridors in. "Cortana, pull up any schematics you've got on Covenant cruiser layouts and designs. If there's anyplace that we can access the _Eternity_'s AI, it will probably be the control room. We need to get there as soon as possible, before the Covenant realize what we're up to."

"Accessing," Cortana responded. A second later, a holographic overlay flashed on the inside of John's visor. "Every cruiser that we've boarded so far has been slightly different," she reported. "But all of them have several basic similarities. Based on the schematics I have and the corridors that I've been able to map so far here on the _Eternity_, this is the most likely route to the control room." A green line appeared on the overlay, following corridors and snaking around corners until it ended in a chamber that pulsed brighter than the others. "That _should_ be the control room. But I can't make any guarantees."

John paused as he heard the distinctive howl of an Elite somewhere behind and above them. "For now, it will have to be good enough." He turned right into a new corridor. "Keep your eyes open, people."

****Author's Notes: ****Well, this one didn't take nearly as long as I feared it might, though it still isn't as fast as I'd like. Part of that is because it's a bit longer than the average EOE chapter so far. I hope you enjoy it.

* * *

>0445, October 3, 2552, Local Time
 Surface of Eridanus II, Inside the _Echoes of Eternity_:**

After the harsh, brutal noise of the brief battle that had won them entrance into the _Eternity_, the silence of the ruined Covenant vessel was unsettling. Every now and then, glimmers of red would ghost across John's motion sensor display, but the aliens themselves were staying well out of sight. The appearance of a squad of Marines no doubt had them unsettled, but the fact that two Spartans were leading the Humans likely had them close to panic. Not even a grunt had been spotted since the slaughter just outside.

John just hoped the calm would last.

"We're still two levels below the control center," Cortana's voice broke into his thoughts. "Take the next ramp to your right."

"Copy. Have you been able to tap into the Covenant's communications yet?"

"Negative," she answered. "There _are_ none. The ship's onboard battle net is completely scrambled. Nothing but white noise. If her external communications are in the same shape, that would explain why there aren't any other Covenant vessels already in orbit."

"It would also prove Admiral Marks' theory about why she tried to access the communications system of the Longsword that first found her," he said. "She has no other way to call for backup."

"Let's just hope they don't manage to fix any of her transmitters before we're out of here," the AI said, echoing his thoughts.

John paused at the intersection of the corridor they were in and the ramp that Cortana had indicated. He watched his motion sensor for a moment, and when no movement showed up, he switched to a left handed stance with his battle rifle and peered around the corner. It was clear. He motioned the insertion team forward.

At the top of the ramp, Cortana directed them to take a left, past the next intersection, and take another left. "There's another ramp one hundred meters ahead. The entrance to the control center will be at the top." She paused. "Wait!"

"Movement!" Linda warned, at the same time that John's sensors suddenly flared red.

Behind the Spartans, the Marines flattened themselves against the bulkheads, or went down on one knee on the deck, trying to make themselves as small as possible. There was a flurry of soft _clicks_ as twenty trigger safeties were suddenly switched to "Fire."

The Master Chief stood against the bulkhead to his left, rifle leveled at the intersection, glancing at the display on his HUD every

other second. There was a lot of red on his motion sensors, but none of it seemed to be coming their direction. "They're guarding the control center," he said softly. "I count at least twenty contacts, probably more." Even as he watched, another pair of red dots merged with the others. "They've guessed our destination."

"I was wondering when they were going to stiffen up," Mitchell muttered from across the corridor. "Please tell me we can use grenades."

"Inside the control center, I wouldn't recommend them," Cortana said. "We don't want to risk damaging the AI's systems. But those Covenant up there are outside the control center." Her voice took on a wry tone. "I don't see why we can't give them a fireworks display."

"Mitchell, Avery, Linda, one grenade each," John instructed as he pulled a fragmentation grenade off his own belt. "Linda, you'll throw yours with mine; Mitchell and Avery, throw yours at the same time after us. Quick succession; don't give them a chance to go for cover or throw them back. As soon as the last pair detonates, we're going around that corner. Shoot anything that moves. Stay low, stay against the bulkheads, and make sure your line of fire is clear."

He slung his battle rifle over his shoulder and pulled the pin on his grenade, holding it up in his right hand. Next to him, Linda did the same. "Readyâ€¦ throw."

The two Spartan leaned around the corner and lobbed the explosives up the ramp.

"They've got barricades!" John warned Mitchell and Avery as he ducked back behind cover. "Give it some arc!"

Even as the first Grunts started squealing in dismay upon sighting the Spartans, the two Marines were tossing their own grenades, hard on the heels of the first. A plasma bolt narrowly missed Mitchell's head, but then they were both out of the line of fire and unslinging their rifles.

Whump-whump! Whump! Whump!

The grenades exploded with devastating force, sending a shockwave down the ramp, followed by a shower of fire, debris, and bodies.

Before the last chunks of metal had even fallen, John was stepping around the corner and starting up the ramp. A double tap dropped a wounded Grunt as it struggled to its feet. Another pair of shots penetrated a blue Elite's damaged shields, and a third shot killed it. Beside him, Linda's sniper rifle roared, instantly slaying a red Elite that was coming through the doors at the top of the ramp to reinforce the depleted defenders.

By the time a surviving Jackal had gotten to its feet and brought its weapon up, the Spartans were nearly at the top of the ramp. John dropped it with a single shot, and a second grunt fell with a squeal as Linda butt-stroked it with her rifle. She shot it as it fell, just to make sure.

The doors hissed open again and a pair of Jackals started to emerge. A rifle barked behind them, and the first alien took the round in the forehead. It crumpled in a shower of purple, and the second quickly retreated. The doors closed, and the insertion team was once again alone, standing amidst the carnage.

"Nice shot, Dupont," Avery said dryly.

The cinnamon-haired girl shrugged in embarrassment. "It was too easy," she muttered. "Where's the rest of 'em? If this is really the control center, wouldn't they put up more of a fight?"

"She has a point," Linda said as she quickly reloaded.

"This is the control center," Cortana said. "And there are more Covenant insideâ€| but not enough. Unless there were much higher casualties during the crash than I'm estimating, there should be a lot more firepower here to stop us."

"Ambush?" Mitchell suggested.

"Likely," John replied. "This force was probably just to test us."

"And?" the Gunnery Sergeant prompted.

"They know we mean business. They'll try to surprise us, hit us hard and fast when we least expect it."

"You think they'll risk tearing up the control center?" Linda asked.

"If they think they're going to lose, yes," he said. "They'd rather have the AI destroyed than let it fall into our hands, just like we would with our own AIs."

"Standard compartment clearing formation?" Mitchell said.

"Negative," the Master Chief answered. "It's too big. There's a lot of open space. Your only cover will be the pillars supporting the second level, and the maintenance section trench in the middle. Linda and I are through first to lay down cover fire. Mitchell, you'll take nine Marines on the right, Avery, the other nine to the left. Spread out and keep moving, but don't get cut off from your party. Get to those pillars for cover. Watch for snipers on the second level."

"Got it," Mitchell said.

"Understood," Avery added.

John stepped up in front of the doors, just far enough back so that the automatic sensors wouldn't activate and open them. Linda was on his right, and behind them the Marines split up and lined up along the bulkheads.

John held up his right fist, waiting until everyone was ready. Then he dropped it. "Move."

As he took his first step, the doors slid open in front of him quietly. Almost immediately, green plasma fire started streaking toward them, the bolts hissing as they slashed past close enough to heat the air around them. A company of Grunts were blazing away at them from the cover of the maintenance trench, while on either side of them, four Jackals were split up into two teams, using their energy shields for cover and spraying fire just as quickly.

"Take the Jackals!" he said to Linda as the two Spartans charged through the door. He opened up on the Grunts, firing until he was out of ammo. Still moving forward, he dropped the empty clip and slammed another one in its place. Though at least three of the Grunts had been too slow and were now sprawled dead on the deck, most of them had ducked under cover to avoid his barrage. Now, thinking he was still reloading, they popped back up, just in time to meet his second volley. Four more of them toppled to the deck amid sprays of bright blue blood, and the remaining few broke and ran with squeals of terror.

On his right, Linda squeezed off a single shot, dropping a Jackal that was holding its shield just a bit too low. Surprised by its companion's sudden demise, the second alien glanced down at the body, unwittingly dropping its guard just enough. The chamber echoed with the distinctive boom of the sniper rifle, and it, too, went down.

Behind the Spartans, the Marines were just now entering the compartment, struggling to keep up with the faster soldiers. The two parties took to the flanks, battle rifles blazing as they spotted more Grunts and a pair of Elites lurking in the shadows. Blue and green fire lashed back at them, and one of the Marines in Avery's squad went down hard as he got caught in the sights of an Elite's plasma rifle. But then they were behind cover, shooting at everything that showed itself, and lobbing grenades after the targets that ducked behind cover. The command center filled with white light as one of the fragmentation grenades set off the cache of plasma grenades an unlucky Grunt had been hiding next to. Bodies, weapons, crates, and pieces of deck plate fell like a deadly rain, killing several of the surviving Covenant, and sending the rest scrambling out of the compartment.

"I think we got 'em!" Mitchell called as he dropped a fleeing Grunt.

It was then that John's motions sensors picked up half a dozen new targets. Some were above, on the second level, but the rest were behind them.

"Behind! Behind!" he shouted as he turned, while directing Linda's attention to the second level, where even now the snipers were opening fire. "Cloaked Elites behind us!"

The Marines started to turn, but it was too late. A trio of the hidden aliens surged from their hiding places against the bulkheads, energy swords blazing into existence as they charged. John emptied his clip into the nearest one, starting to reload and reacquire a new target even before the body hit the deck, but even he wasn't fast enough.

One of the Marines screamed as the nearest Elite ran her through with

its blade. Even as she was lifted from her feet and slammed back against one of the pillars, she dropped her rifle and drew her pistol, emptying the clip into the monster's face. The alien went down, but the Corporal it had attacked stopped moving moments later as she bled out.

Mitchell himself nearly lost his legs as the third Elite swept its blade low. He dove to one side with millimeters to spare, spraying fire from his rifle. His shots went wide, but it startled the alien into hesitation just long enough for Avery, Dupont, and three other Marines to finish it off.

At the same time, Linda was exchanging fire with the three targets up on the second level. John's HUD told him that one was down, but the other two were proving harder to kill. He brought his rifle up and scanned the level above. One of the Elites suddenly popped out right in his sights, but before he could squeeze his trigger, a round from Linda's rifle stopped the alien cold in its tracks, and a second shot sent its body tumbling to the main deck.

"Reload!" Linda called.

John moved to flank her for a better covering position, but even as he did, a burst of blue fire washed over the female Spartan's shields. She dropped her reload clip as she dove to one side. "Covering fire!" John ordered, and the Marines spilled out from under the cover of the second platform and took up firing positions.

The Elite was either bold, or stupid. It leaned back out for another shot, and caught no less than forty rounds. It gave a groan that sounded vaguely disappointed and collapsed to the deck.

John scanned the room quickly, making sure it was clear. No threats presented themselves. "Fan out," he told the Marines. "Secure this command center." He leaned down and pulled Linda up by her hand. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "My armor's a little scorched, but shields are recharging and all indicators are green."

"I thought I recommended no grenades in the command center," Cortana said stiffly.

"Hey, we got the job done," Avery replied with a matching tone. "If we hadn't used grenades, we'd still be getting slaughtered in here."

John waved her off; he didn't have time for arguments right now. "Gunnery Sergeant, report," he said as he headed for what he hoped would be the command center's main console.

"Compartment secure," Mitchell said grimly. "But we lost two more. Private McDonnell and Corporal Alexander. Everybody else is good, though."

"Keep your sights on those doors," the Master Chief answered, hoping Mitchell didn't take him to be as unfeeling as he sounded. "I don't want any surprises while we extract this AI. Cortana, we need a way to pull _Eternity's_ AI out and store it safely until we can get home and give her to ONI. Ideas?"

"Use the memory card in Linda's suit," Cortana said immediately. "I can make sure the connection with her armor's system is cut off, so the AI won't give her any grief. That's the only way I can think of, unless you want two of us running around in your head."

"Thanks, but no," John said. "This console will it do?"

"Looks good," she answered. "Plug me in."

"Watch out for any defenses the AI has erected for herself."

"Hey, it's me," she said with a tone that practically dripped with a mixture of confidence and wry indignation.

John pulled her card from the slot in his helmet, and plugged it into a nearly identical slot on the console. It looked like the Covenant had gotten ideas for more than their AIs from the humans. The interface was almost exactly the same as that found on most UNSC ships.

"I'm in," Cortana's voice came from a speaker seconds later. "That's odd I'm not detecting any defenses."

"Good. Maybe she's shut down. Linda," he said, holding out his hand. "Your memory card."

The other Spartan removed her card and held it out to John.

"No need," Cortana said in profound disgust.

Her tone surprised John so much that he didn't even notice when Linda pressed her card into his hand. "What's wrong?"

"You're not going to like this."

"Tell me."

"She's not here."

9. Chapter 9: Unseen Predator

****Author's Notes: ****Hey folks, at long last I have a spare moment to devote to this fanfic, and I present you with a new chapter. Deployments and various other taskings for my ship have kept me away from writing for far too long, and unfortunately, this chance appears to be an exception, rather than the new rule. So, I'll continue to update when I'm able. I had originally intended this chapter to be longer, but after a second review, I think that it ends in a rather interesting spot. Read on to see if you agree!

* * *

>0517, October 3, 2552, Local Time
 Control Center,
Echoes of Eternity**

"You have got to be kidding me," Sergeant Avery said into the silence that followed Cortana's statement. "We lost two good people for nothing?" She made no attempt at concealing the disgust in her

voice.

"Cool it, Sergeant," Mitchell warned. "It's not their fault."

But neither John nor Linda were listening. "Where is she?" the Master Chief asked Cortana.

"Wish I could tell you, Chief," came the apologetic reply. "This console has been locked down, and the others in this compartment probably have as well. I can't access the ship's mainframe from the control center at all." She paused for a moment. "Hmm. Interesting. It looks like the AI herself locked these systems down. The lockdown program is carrying a software authorization sequence; it's not an actual hardware block."

"Which meansâ€¦ what?" Linda prompted.

"It's possible the AI is operating autonomously, without direct commands from her Covenant overseers."

> "She won't download willingly," John said grimly. "Get what you can from the console's built in hard drives, Cortana. As soon as you're done, we're moving out. We'll have to do this the hard way." <p>

"Already done," she said. "There's nothing here. It's all been wiped. I'm ready to be transferred back to your suit."

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm not going to like the 'hard way?'" Mitchell asked.

"Because you're not," John answered as he removed Cortana's card and inserted it back into his suit. He was silent for a moment as her icy presence once again washed through his awareness. "We're going to have to search the ship, but we can't stay long enough for us to do it as one force. We'll have to split up into scouting parties."

"That'll be suicide!" Avery protested.

"No it won't," piped Dupont from where she was sitting on one of the consoles, watching the nearest entrance. "It'll be just like playing cat and mouse with my brothers in the fields on my parents' farm back home. The mouse moves quickly and silently, trying to spot the cats before he gets caught, all the while trying to reach the cheese." She tapped the side of her head with one finger. "You just gotta know how the cats think."

It wasn't the comparison that John would have used, but it worked well enough, he supposed. "We have to assume the Covenant know what we're after now," he put in. "They know that we're already onboard the ship and that we have enough firepower to stop just about anything they throw at us, if we're careful. They won't waste time patrolling useless corridors or compartments. They'll guard vital systems and areas, especially the AI's central location. What we have to do is determine where that central location is, and get to it before the Covenant realize we've found it."

"But how do we do that?" Avery said bluntly.

"Small forces," the Master Chief said. "Five four-man fire teams."

We'll split up and check out the most likely locations first. When one team finds it, they'll report to the others, and we'll rendezvous on them before making our move. I'll lead Alpha Team. Linda, Bravo; Mitchell, Charlie; Avery, Delta; Sergeant Harris," he pointed at another of the Marines, " you lead Echo. Mitchell, you know your Marines best. Split them up as you see fit."

"Can I go with the Master Chief?" Dupont interrupted.

"No, you're going with me," Avery said sternly.

Mitchell just chuckled. "No offense, Sergeant, but she'll probably be safer with the Master Chief. Let her go with him."

Avery looked sullen, but nodded.

"All right," the Gunnery Sergeant went on, "Leeds, Starks, you're on Alpha; Dean, Cromwell, Jacobs, you're on Bravo"

Moments later, the five fire teams had dispersed, each moving away from the control center in a different direction. The search pattern that Cortana had come up with for them to follow was hastily put together, at best. She'd selected the sections of the ship she considered most likely for the Covenant to keep the AI's central systems in. In order to keep their search coordinated, each of the teams were to constantly update their current positions with the other teams. The two Spartans could use their HUDs for guidance, while the Marines were using hardcopy charts. The charts were standard issue for boarding parties, now, but they were only general outlines; any Covenant ship that had been customized or built to different specs would be unique. And the Eternity was already proving to be very unique indeed.

The first problem surfaced less than five minutes into their search.

"Cortana, Echo Lead, we've got issues," Sergeant Harris' voice crackled over the comm.

"Talk to me," Cortana piped casually, as if she weren't concerned at all.

"According to my chart, I'm supposed to be looking at a hatch. Instead, I've got a bulkhead covered in piping and display screens."

"Where are you?"

"Uh" one deck down, about 100 meters aft of the control center."

"Stand by." Cortana was silent for a few seconds as she pondered the version of the charts she had stored in her memory files. "Can you go starboard?"

"Affirmative."

"About fifty meters down, there should be another access heading aft. Try there."

"Copy. Echo Lead out."

Nor was it the first such issue. Avery on Delta called twice in just as many minutes for help navigating around some sort of lab facility that shouldn't have been there. Linda's Bravo Team reported finding an entire extra flight bay where there should have been storerooms; unfortunately, it had been burned out during the crash. In fact, only Charlie and Alpha Teams seemed to have any luck following their original chosen routes.

"I hate this, " Dupont muttered directly behind the Master Chief. "All this sneaking around in these tight corridors like rodents. I'd rather be out in the open."

"Rodents in the open aren't much of a challenge," John said cryptically.

"What's that mean?" she asked.

"I think it means you need to shut up, or you're gonna get us all killed," Lance Corporal Leeds said sourly.

The redhead shrugged apologetically and fell silent.

Twice, John had to halt his fire team in order to avoid running into Covenant. They were only small parties â€" either patrols or stragglers trying to regroup, he couldn't tell â€" and he had little doubt that he and the Marines could take them. But he couldn't afford to take any casualties, or waste ammunitionâ€| or attract attention. If they hoped to complete their mission, they needed to remain unseen for as long as possible.

"This is really weird," Sergeant Harris' voice crackled over the comm suddenly.

"Say again?" Linda asked.

"Sorry, Echo Lead to all teams," the Marine corrected himself. "We just found something strange down here."

"Care to elaborate, Sergeant?" Mitchell put in impatiently.

"Covenant," came the response. "Two Elites, two Jackals, dead."

"Probably killed in the crash," John said. "I'm surprised we haven't seen more bodies."

"Negative," Harris said. "I don't think that's what killed them, sir. There's no blood, no wounds. They're just laying here in the corridor."

The comm went silent. No one knew what to say.

"Sergeant, where are you?" Cortana asked suddenly.

"Uhâ€| just a corridor as far as I can tell."

"Can you see blast doors?"

"There's none on the charts." He paused. "Wait, yeah, I see them. They're not listed but we've got one forward of us about ten meters, and another one aft about five meters."

"It's an internal airlock," the AI said urgently. "Sergeant, you and your fire team need to get out of there, _now._"

"Why, what's â€"

"_Do it!_" she shouted loud enough to make John wince.

The Marine's training kicked in, overcoming his confusion. "Moving!" he replied. "Fire team, on me! Move!" Unfortunately, it was too late. "Whoa, the doors are closing!" he reported a second later.

"Get out of there, now!" Cortana ordered. "Just run!"

There was a moment of silence as the rest of the fire teams waited with baited breath, listening for any sound at all. Thenâ€|

"They're trapped inside! They're trapped inside! The rest of my team is still inside!" It was Harris. "The doors closed too fast! Kadee, talk to me! What's going on in there?" There was no answer. "Something's going on. I can see them, but something's wrong! Burning stars, I think they're suffocating! The atmosphere is being sucked out! Cortana, I need this airlock open now!"

"There's nothing I can do," Cortana responded, barely loud enough to be heard over the Sergeant's shouting. She sounded sad, and John felt his heart sink. He knew how this was going to end up.

"Cortana!" Harris howled. "Open this airlock! My people are dying in there!"

"I can't do anything!" Cortana yelled back. "I don't have any links with the ship's systems! I have no way to get that door open!"

"Shoot it!" Avery screamed over the comm. "Shoot the door! You have to do something!"

Automatic gunfire crackled in everyone's earpieces, making them jump in surprise.

"No effect!" Harris shouted. "I can't even find controls! Where are the burning controls!? I need to get this door open! Kadee, Janson, someone talk to me in there! What's your status? What's your status!?"

10. Chapter 10: Access

****Author's Notes: ****This chapter is a bit short but I wanted to get it out before I head back out to sea again. It gets the story moving along once again. Hopefully, I'll have a chance to write while I'm gone, and will have another update when I return. Enjoy!

* * *

>0530, October 3, 2552, Local Time
 Corridors, **_**Echoes of Eternity**_

They found Sergeant Harris a few minutes later, sitting with his back against the airlock door behind which the rest of his fire team had been trapped. He was staring blankly at the far bulkhead, silent, surrounded by empty battle rifle and pistol magazines. Behind him, the metal alloy door was pocked and scored from hundreds of hits, but the damage was little more than cosmetic. He'd expended every round of ammunition he had, and it hadn't made a difference.

John approached slowly, recognizing that the Sergeant could be in an unsteady state of mind. Watching friends die did things to any person's head. Harris didn't even look up at him as he stood over him. He started toward the airlock view port.

"Don't bother," Harris said suddenly, quietly. "Nothing but corpses in there."

John looked anyway. As he'd expected, the four Marines inside were dead, suffocated in a matter of moments. Private First Class Amanda Kadee hadn't even fallen. She was on her knees, head bowed as if in prayer, her battle rifle clutched in both handsâ€ still covering the far exit as ordered.

But just as Harris has reported, before the airlock doors had started closing, there were also the bodies of several dead Covenant inside. It looked like they had died the same way.

Cortana came to the same conclusion he did. "I'm not so sure the Covenant have control of their own AI right now," she said quietly, on his private comm channel. "She must be in some kind of self defense mode, but she can't tell friend from foe. Who knows how many other traps like this one are onboard, just waiting for someone to stumble into them? Are we still sure we want to bring this thing back with us?"

"We've got our orders," John said simply. He reached down to pat Harris on the shoulder. "Let's go."

Just as the Sergeant started to stand, the airlock door's seal disengaged with a hiss of lost vacuum, and slid upward into the overhead. Harris just stood there for a moment, then started toward his fallen fire team.

"Wait," the Spartan said, stopping him in his tracks. "She's just setting the trap again."

Harris looked at him in confusion.

"Eternity has probably been programmed to recognize human behavior," he explained. "She knows we go back for our dead." He nodded toward the dead Marines. "She wants us to go in there and try to get them outâ€ so that she can seal us in and kill us, too."

At first, he thought the Sergeant was going to protest, but then he just nodded, picked up his battle rifle, and dropped the empty clip. "I'm going to need some ammo."

Even after finding their way back to their original route, the Master

Chief knew that the loss of Echo Team was going to continue to slow them down. Now that they knew the ship was booby trapped, they'd have to step extra carefully, double checking even innocuous looking bulkheads and hatches, just to make sure they couldn't be turned into some sort of weapon by the wayward onboard AI.

As they progressed deeper and deeper into the ship, they found more and more bodies. It was quickly becoming clear that the Covenant were fighting their own ship as much as they were the Humans. Some of the dead aliens had been suffocated like the first group; others had been electrocuted, and a few had even been killed by what looked like friendly fire - no doubt cut down by panicked comrades blazing away in a haze of unreasoning terror. The Master Chief had seen a lot of things in his lifetime, but something that could stop a fully armed and armored Elite dead in its tracks in a matter of seconds sent a chill down even his spine.

"So what now?" Mitchell voiced over the comm the question that all of them were thinking. "If the AI is trying to kill them, the Covenant probably aren't going to be protecting her central location. So how do we find it?"

"Well, we can't go based off of where the Covenant _aren't_ hanging out," Avery put in. "Eighty percent of the ship must be abandoned."

"Abandoned, and badly damaged," John said. "In order to survive and function properly, Eternity needs power. She'll be cutting off power to systems and sections of the ship that she doesn't need or can't use. Cortana, if I plug you into a data terminal, can you trace where the power relay commands are originating from?"

"I'll probably have to hack through some defenses," the AI replied thoughtfully. "And there's no guarantee that she won't be able to back trace my access. But it's worth a shot. It's either that, or we can keep wandering around this deathtrap all day."

"All right," John said, "all fire teams hold position and take cover. Once we have some results, I'll have further orders." He waited until the other teams acknowledged, then started looking for a data terminal. He found one in a service corridor a few minutes later. He posted the members of his team to cover him while he got Cortana plugged in. "Is it even active?" he asked after a moment.

"Thank the stars for small miracles," she replied wryly. "At least I'm getting some sort of data flow here. She apparently didn't think this console was worth locking down. It's function is relatively minor though, and it's not designed to have access to most of the ship's major systems. It'll take me a few moments to even access the mainframe."

"We need that information," he reiterated. "Do what you have to."

It took her nearly a full minute, which was, for Cortana, a long time. "Got it," she said finally. "Mainframe access." She paused. "As I suspected, she's got defenses and traps set up everywhere. She abandoned all the files and programs for peripheral and nonessential systems, and locked down everything from weapons and life support to communications and sensors. All manual controls and systems have been overridden and locked out. She's definitely in self-preservation

mode, big time."

"Can you figure out where she's at? Or at least pinpoint a location where we could download her program, or a copy of it?"

"I'm setting up query programs right now, to see if I can trace her command routes. I can try to be stealthy, so she doesn't realize I'm in here looking for her, but it will take several minutes, at least. Or I can be quick and dirty, but she'll know what we're up to in a matter of seconds."

John thought over the options. The success of their original plan had depended on their speed, and they'd been significantly bogged down. Finding Eternity's location quickly was definitely appealing, but the situation had changed dramatically. The Covenant knew they were aboard. So did Eternity, but unlike the Covenant, she probably didn't know why. If they could keep her in the dark until it was too late for her to defend against a download, that would eliminate a major headache.

"Take the stealthy route," he ordered.

"Copy," she replied. "Here goes nothing."

And that was it. John could do nothing but wait. It was his least favorite part of any mission: sitting back and waiting for someone else to do the work. But there were none better than Cortana for something like this, and he just had to trust that she could get the job done.

"She's on to me!" Cortana exclaimed suddenly on a few seconds later. "She's faster than I predicted!"

John tensed a bit, leaning over the console as if he could will Cortana to win the virtual battle that was suddenly erupting. "Do you have a location yet?"

"Negative!" the AI replied, and the Master Chief noticed with a bit of concern that her voice actually sounded stressed. "My query programs are less than ten percent complete! She's trying to isolate them and overwrite them. She's trying to infect my programming with viruses!"

"That's it, I'm pulling you out," he said.

"No! I can get it! A few more seconds!"

From the sounds of it, John was going to have to buy her those seconds. He thought fast. "Mitchell!" he barked over the Marines' comm channel. "Find something important looking and blow it up, now! That goes for all fire teams!"

"Chief?" Mitchell started to ask.

"She's running too many subroutines!" he vaguely heard Cortana exclaiming. "She's erasing my queries; I can't stop them all!"

"Just shoot something!" he ordered Mitchell.

There was no verbal response. The deck beneath him shuddered almost

imperceptibly, then again, harder this time, as grenades and shaped charges started exploding. He could almost imagine the Marines a few levels below him, throwing ordnance in every direction.

He suddenly realized that Cortana had fallen silent. "All teams, hold fire," he said. The cacophony beneath him abruptly faded away. "Cortana?"

For a moment, there was silence. "'Just shoot something,' huh, Chief?" the AI said wryly. "Crude, but effective. Eternity was distracted just long enough for me to get the edge."

"And?" he prompted.

"I found her."

11. Chapter 11: Sacred Fire

****Author's Notes: ****Again, I apologize for having taken so long with this next chapter. It has been sitting on my hard drive, mostly complete, for over a month now. I have been attending specialized training for the Navy, however, and was unable to work on it. Here it is though. A nice little showcase of combat, inspired by some particularly close calls in the game myself.

* * *

>0600, October 3, 2552, Local Time
 Corridors, ****_**Echoes of Eternity**_**

It took longer than the Master Chief would have liked for the fire teams to rendezvous on his position, but now that they knew where they were going, he wanted them together. At first, he had planned to keep the teams split up, and have them approach their target destination from different directions, in order to sow further confusion among the enemy ranks. But they didn't know the size or the composition of any force that might be guarding their goal, and the last thing he wanted was to have a fire team "or more than one" get pinned down and cut off from help. It would be better to stick together, assess the situation, and then make further plans.

"All right, Cortana," he said once the last team, Charlie, had arrived, "where exactly are we going?"

"It's a large compartment four decks above us and approximately two hundred twenty meters aft of our position," she replied. "There's nothing like it on the standard Covenant vessel charts that I have. It's located where several auxiliary equipment compartments and a secondary command and control center would normally be. I tried to pull exact specs for it, but Eternity cut me off before I could get more than fragmentary information. The partial label I got for it was 'Sacred.'"

"'Sacred?'" Mitchell echoed thoughtfully. "That doesn't make much sense."

"Don't the Covenant think their technology is sacred?" Lance Corporal Dupont put in.

"Technology that's based on that of the Forerunners, yes," Cortana confirmed.

"So that means that this AI might be partially based on Forerunner technology, as well as information taken from captured Human ships," John concluded.

"Not a very comforting idea," the AI said softly. "But that would be a reasonable assumption."

"What about security systems for the compartment?" Linda asked. "Were you able to pull any specs on that?"

"Negative," came the expected response. "I have no idea what we might be facing. We have to assume there's some sort of system in place though, otherwise, the Covenant would have already neutralized Eternity."

"We might need to get creative," John put in. "Mitchell, what kind of heavy ordnance do you still have?"

"Concussion and fragmentation grenades, shaped charges," the Gunnery Sergeant said. "Hall, you still got your launcher?"

"As usual, sir," the Marine replied. "Want me to unpack her, Master Chief?"

"Couldn't hurt," the Spartan said.

He waited until Hall had his rocket launcher unpacked and loaded, ready to go except for the safety guard over the trigger. He had no idea what they might be able to use it on; launching rockets in the confined corridors of a ship was often a one way ride straight to hell, but on a ship like the Eternity, he didn't want to leave any of his cards stuck up his sleeve. As soon as Mitchell signaled that his Marines were ready, John ordered them into an expanded version of the basic fire team formation. He would take point with Mitchell and Dupont, while Linda and Avery held 'six' as rearguard. The other Marines would be free to reinforce either the forward or rear positions, or break off to cover side corridors as needed. The whole formation was flexible; as they moved through the ship, passing corridors or compartments, turning corners, or moving up and down ramps, John could very easily find himself in the middle of the pack, while someone else took point. The key was that the point man covered the first possible threat vector he came across, while the others behind him moved onto the next one, until everyone was clear and he was able to rejoin the formation.

It was not the fastest way to reach their objective, but it was the safest, and the Marines were well acquainted with the procedure. They moved fluidly and confidently, always keeping their battle rifles pointed toward any possible attack, careful not to bring their own companions into their line of fire.

They found no Covenant for the first several minutes. On the next level up, a lone Grunt wandered down a side corridor, oblivious to the Humans. It didn't even have a chance to realize it was dead before Dupont put a single round between its eyes at almost twenty five yards.

"Nice shot, Dupont," Mitchell said. "But next time, wait until we have a chance to make a quieter kill. The last thing we want is to broadcast our position to any of his buddies that might be hanging around."

The Lance Corporal actually blushed. "Sorry, sir," she murmured.

The third level up from their previous position was also clear, although they only had to traverse three corridors before they found a ramp up to the same level as their objective. When they reached the top of the ramp, John quickly spotted their first serious resistance.

"Hunters," he all but growled. "At least two, but I saw shadows from something around the corner."

"No way to take Hunters out quietly," Mitchell said. "The best way to do it is quickly."

Corporal Hall looked hopeful.

"Uh oh," Dupont quipped before she could think better of it.

"No rockets," the Master Chief said, noting that Hall looked considerably disappointed. "They're too close. Grenades won't do much good either."

"Could wait until their backs are to us," Linda said over John's helmet comm. "Hit them where there's no armor."

"No good," he said. "They've been set to guard this ramp. They're just standing there, blocking the whole corridor. We'll have to take them head on, but I'd prefer not to use several hundred rounds of ammunition in the process." He glanced to Mitchell. "Think you can get a shot at one of their necks while coming up the ramp?"

The Marine shook his head. "I'm good, but not that good." He nodded at Dupont. "That's her specialty."

"All right, Dupont, you're with me. As soon as your barrel clears the top of the ramp, make your shot. If you miss, call it out and start backing up. I'll cover you until you're clear, and then we'll find a spot to hold out until we can stop him."

"'k," she said uncertainly.

John checked to make sure he had a full magazine, got the ready signal from Dupont, then motioned for her to advance up the ramp. He moved right beside her, matching her slightly slower pace so that they would both acquire their targets at the same time. He kept his gaze fixed along the sights of his rifle, his eyes locked on the spot where he instinctively knew his weapon's target line ended. When he found his target, he wouldn't have to waste any time lining up his shot.

Suddenly, his barrel cleared the top of the ramp. He fired at the exact same moment as Dupont, their rifles making a single, loud report in the confines of the corridor.

The Hunters never knew what hit them. They'd been guarding the same

spot for far too long, with no expectation of resistance. Their comparatively small brains didn't have a chance to process the visual image of a massive, iridescent green-armored Spartan and a much smaller, red-headed girl appearing at the top of the ramp â€" seemingly out of nowhere â€" before it was all over.

John put his round through the left Hunter's throat. Dupont put hers through the right Hunter's narrow helmet visor. John's target staggered around for a few seconds, spraying fluorescent orange blood, before crashing to the deck with the horrendous thud of hundreds of pounds of bone, muscle, and armor in freefall. Dupont's target simply fell face first right where it stood, stiff as a steel rod, leaving a colorful orange smear on the bulkhead behind it.

"Showoff," Cortana muttered on John's private comm channel.

"Clear," Dupont reported. There was no hint of the previous uncertainty in her voice now.

But even as she said it, John's motion sensors flashed red, and he heard the sound of running feet on the deck plates. Running away from them. "Cancel that!" he called. "We've got runners! Formation up! Dupont, cover right! Mitchell, you've got right point, I'm on left. Move!"

The formation moved as a single unit. Dupont pivoted to her right, her rifle already covering the corridor, ready to engage any opponent that showed itself. Mitchell instantly filled the spot she'd previously occupied, covering the right side of the corridor ahead as he brought his rifle up, while John covered the left. Behind them, the rest of the Marines advanced on their heels, keeping their rifles tucked until they had a chance to cover a clear threat vector. At the rear of the formation, Linda was facing away from them, covering their six, her armored form rendering the corridor impassible to any foe that wanted to overtake them. Avery was at her back, watching the formation, ready to tap the female Spartan when it was time for them to catch up.

John advanced as quickly as he dared, trying not to leave the Marines behind. If he'd been by himself, he would have darted ahead as fast as he could. The fleeing Covenant were probably on their way to warn more of their brethren, and they had to be stopped before that happened. But he couldn't break formation and leave the rest of his companions exposed, in case they came under fire from other directions.

A full four seconds after he'd given his commands, they rounded the corner, around which the contacts had disappeared. Already twenty meters down the corridor, two Jackals were running for their lives, holding their energy shields over the backs of their heads and shoulders in the hopes of deflecting any shots. A burst from Mitchell's rifle dropped one of them; it flopped around wounded on the deck until another burst killed it. John took a split second to line up his shot; his round hit the Jackal's shield emitter, disabling it. A second squeeze of the trigger put the creature on the deck under a purple rain of its own blood.

"That's it!" Cortana called. "That corridor up there, that leads to Eternity's central core!"

As if her words had summoned it, another Hunter stepped into view, its fuel rod launcher already leveled at them and glowing brilliant green. A yellow-armored Elite came right behind it, the bright blue-white glare of its energy sword contrasting weirdly with the verdant light of the launcher.

Mitchell did about the only thing he could do, given the situation. He emptied his magazine at the Hunter, all the while flinging every curse and oath in his book in the same direction.

John tried to place his shots more effectively, and while he saw orange blood start to run, the Hunter was still standing, and drawing a bead on them with its launcher. Some of his rounds ricocheted off the massive creature's armor and glanced off the Elite's shields, but it just raised its sword and howled in defiance.

"Fall back!" the Spartan started to yell, even as he realized that at least some of the Marines were about to die.

But his words were drowned out by a deafening roar, and a streak of orange flame flashed past his helmet, making his shields hiss from the heat. The Hunter disappeared in a gout of fire and molten deck plate as the rocket slammed dead center into its chest. The yellow Elite was flung backward out of sight.

"Whooooo! Momma, turn off the oven and pull out the roast, 'cuz somethin's burnin'!"

John turned his head a few inches to the right and saw the smoking barrel of Hall's rocket launcher poised just above his shoulder. "Good timing," was all he could think to say.

"Oo-rah, Marine Corps," Hall replied, and fell back to reload.

"Contact!" Mitchell called. "Lots of contact!"

The Master Chief faced forward again. At first, he couldn't see anything. Then he saw the shimmers of movement around the flaming crater the rocket had left. They were little more than shadows, but as one of them actually slipped through the flames, he recognized the distinctive and all-too-familiar form.

Cloaked Elites. Lots of them.

End
file.